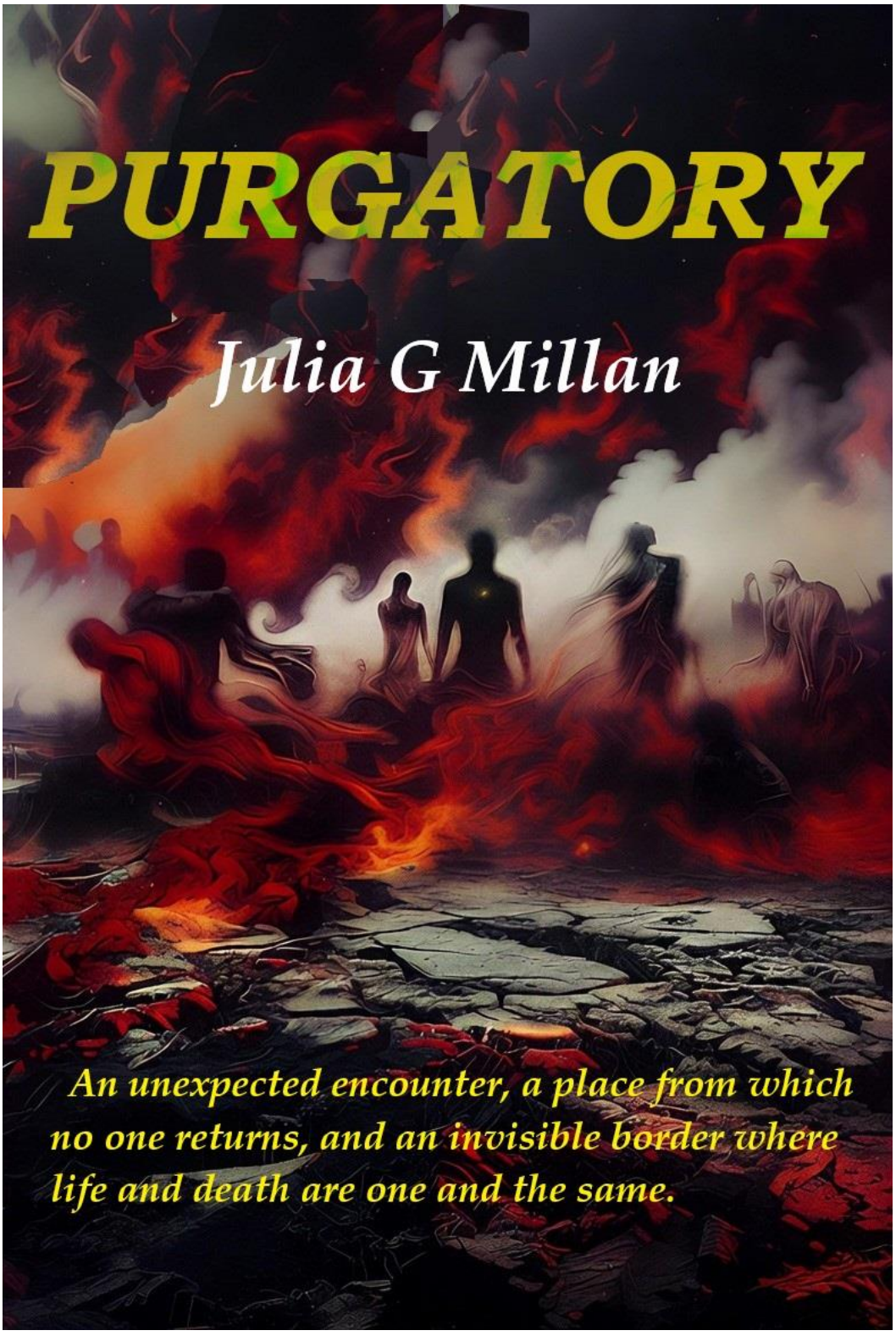

PURGATORY
Julia G Millan
An unexpected encounter, a place from which no one returns, and an invisible border where life and death are one and the same.

Purgatory

A novel by

Julia G Millan

An unexpected encounter, a place from which no one returns, and an invisible border where life and death are one and the same.

Synopsis

Michelle goes to a bar with some friends after finishing her day at the office. What was initially meant to be a pleasant and relaxed afternoon transforms, after meeting a guy, into something she never dreamed of experiencing.

Suddenly, reality shatters, and Michelle finds herself in a place that shouldn't exist. Trapped in a shadowy dimension filled with echoes, she discovers herself in a gray and suffocating environment where time seems to have stopped. The boundary between dream and reality has blurred, and something ancient and merciless is closing. She faces a relentless journey through nightmarish realms where the consequences of her choices are revealed in horrifying detail.

In this hostile setting, her only hope is to follow a mysterious and unsettling guide, who claims to know her better than she knows herself.

Is it hallucination, a mind hijacking, or something much more real? On this journey through distorted reality, the line between what is real and what is a nightmare becomes invisible, forcing Michelle to walk along the edge of an abyss where life and death become indistinguishable.

A dark, atmospheric, and deeply disturbing story that will leave you questioning every choice you make after dark.

Index

Synopsis

The Bar

The Pianist

Desolation

The Rain

Gertrude

The Rose Garden

The Poet

The Gateway

The Awakening

The Bar

"Well, I'm not planning on having any," Jessica said. "Kids are a trap. My mom had four, and she always told me: 'Honey, you live your life. Don't let what happened to me happen to you.'"

"Wait, you seriously don't feel the motherhood calling?" Emily asked. "We're not getting any younger and..."

"I don't feel any calling. Unless it screams my name at the top of its lungs..." We all laughed. "Do you feel it?"

"No, me neither. But this morning I saw one of those things the phone suggests, saying that after thirty-five, women start getting this urge to..."

"Yeah, to get pregnant before it's too late..."

"Before 'the clock runs out,'" I added.

"Exactly."

"Well, I don't have any urge. And honestly, I don't think I ever will."

We had just left the office after a brutal workday and stopped by a bar that had recently opened. It was far enough from the office that the annoying guys we worked with wouldn't show up. We could enjoy a good beer in peace and, who knows, maybe even meet someone worth talking to.

"Hey, this place is awesome," Jessica said, looking around.

"Right?" Emily replied. "I told you. And you can't deny this beer is killer."

"It's craft, right?" I asked.

"Yeah, they make it themselves. It's got just the right amount of acidity and almost no aftertaste. If you want it more intense, you can order it unfiltered. But I prefer this one."

"Yeah, this one's really good," Jessica said. "I like the smoother ones. They go down easier."

"No! Shit!" Emily suddenly exclaimed, staring at the entrance. She frowned, and those little wrinkles around her eyes appeared—the ones that showed up every time she got annoyed. "They found us! Damn it!"

Sure enough, our coworkers had spotted us. George—the sleaziest and most annoying one of all—had already seen us and was heading straight for our table.

"Look the other way! Look the other way! Maybe we'll get lucky and they'll walk past."

"No, Jessica. It's too late," I sighed. "They've seen us."

And sure enough, the three of them were walking toward us, with George leading the pack.

"Hey, girls!" Keith said, stepping ahead of his boss. "Didn't you say you didn't feel like going out today? That you were super tired?"

"Yeah."

"So... you changed your minds at the last minute or what?"

"Looks like it."

Idiot George had already planted himself next to me, while the other two went looking for empty chairs so they could do the same. All of this despite the funeral faces we were making. Emily looked at me as if to say, *Are these guys idiots or what? Can't they tell we don't want anything to do with them?*

But it didn't matter. In seconds, the three of them were settled in next to us, trying for the hundredth time to flirt with one of us.

"Girls! What's wrong?" Keith asked after several failed attempts to get us to talk.

No one answered. The silence was starting to feel awkward to me, so I said without changing my expression:

"Nothing. We're just tired."

"You didn't look tired when we walked in... You seemed pretty happy."

More stony silence. Keith, now getting desperate, tried again with me:

"Hey, Michelle, thanks a lot for that report this morning."

"No problem," I replied, without looking at him, taking a sip of my beer.

"It really helped me out. You know the boss has been on my ass lately about those charts and..."

"We didn't come here to talk about work," Jessica interrupted.

"Well, I was talking to Michelle," he complained. But I made a face supporting what my friend said, and he shut up.

That’s when Tom, who hadn’t said a word the whole time and had been staring at me non-stop, tried to be the voice of reason:

"Hey, why don’t we just go to our usual bar?"

"Why? We haven’t even ordered anything yet!"

"That’s exactly why. From what I can see, they only have craft beers here, and I’d rather have a regular Budweiser. The one I know." He stood up, and the other two followed so they wouldn’t leave their friend hanging. If it had been up to them, they would’ve kept bothering us longer.

Once they finally left the bar, the three of us let out a deep sigh of relief.

"Thank God!" Jessica said. "I thought they’d ruined this place for us too. Jesus, they’re so annoying!"

"Deep down I feel a little sorry for them," I added. "They’re kind of pathetic."

"Well, I don’t feel sorry for them at all," Emily replied. "They’re horny and just looking for some flower to land on."

"Because no one pays attention to them."

"Who’s going to pay attention to that bunch of creeps? George and Keith must be pushing forty..."

"Or more."

"Exactly, more. And both of them are divorced because their wives couldn’t stand them. Now they’re out looking for new victims."

"I don’t think Tom’s that bad," I said. "He must be around our age. He’s never been married, right?"

"I don’t think so. But who would marry that idiot?"

"When I say marry, I mean live with someone. Nobody gets married anymore."

"It’s the same thing. None of the three are worth it."

"I agree," Emily said. "These guys are the prototype of the standard man—the classic guy. From what I know about Keith, right after getting married he knocked his wife up and turned into a total mess.’ He got a beer belly, went bald, and didn’t help with anything around the house. His wife had to do everything because he wouldn’t lift a finger."

"God, that’s disgusting!" Jessica said with a look of contempt.

"Even so, they lasted five years. Five years! Five years of torture until his wife finally kicked his ass to the curb."

"See? That’s why I don’t want kids. In the end, you end up raising them alone while still working. It’s a death trap."

"And why did George get divorced?" I asked. "He didn’t have kids, right?"

"No, thank God! If he had, he would've made Sharon's life miserable."

"Sharon? From Admin?"

"Of course! Didn't you know? Why do you think she asked for a transfer? She used to be with us in Operations, but after the divorce they moved her so she wouldn't have to deal with that asshole."

"Ah!"

"Sharon didn't waste any time kicking him to the curb either," Emily continued. "She saw it coming pretty quickly after they moved in together."

"Same thing that happened with the other one," Jessica added. "He got comfortable right away."

"Didn't he help around the house either?"

"I don't know about that. The problem with this guy was... well, he's a total bore. Super boring."

"He was like the other" Emily added. "He didn't want to go out, and he'd spend the whole weekend on the couch watching that sports channel. You know the one."

"Yeah, I know. No wonder Sharon told him to go to hell."

"I think they didn't even last a year. Deep down they're all the same."

Jessica nodded, but I had my doubts about that "all the same" comment.

"Tom doesn't seem like the other two," I observed. Emily looked at me, surprised.

"Oh, so he gives you butterflies, huh?"

"No."

"Don't deny it, Michelle. He gives you butterflies." They both laughed.

"I'm serious. I just think... he's not as bad as the others."

"You're saying that because he's not bad-looking, and it's true. He's not bald yet and doesn't have much of a belly."

"I don't think he'll go bald. Blond guys tend to keep their hair better."

"Ooh!" Jessica said, looking at Emily. "If we're not careful, this one's gonna snatch her and we'll lose a friend!"

The three of us laughed, and for a moment I pictured myself wearing an apron, sweeping the house and bringing Tom a beer while he watched football. Then I said:

"Don't worry, you're not losing any friend. I'm not going anywhere with Tom... or anyone else. I'm never living with a guy, ever," I declared. "For a good time, sure—because who doesn't like a good roll in the hay?"

"As long as the specimen is worth it, right?" Emily added.

"Obviously!" I said, and we all laughed again.

That’s when the music started. The place had a small dance floor inside, and some girls started dancing. It didn’t take long for us to join them.

And then… that’s when Antonio showed up.

He was a tall, dark-haired guy around thirty… a total top-tier male specimen. Tattooed arms and a captivating smile that melted all three of us.

Antonio started dancing next to Jessica, and it was obvious they were really into each other. Well, Emily and I were into him too, but our friend is… well, let’s be honest, more spectacular. Slim and amazing curves—she had a killer body. She was the most attractive of the three, although Emily, a blonde with a beautiful figure, wasn’t far behind. Maybe I was the least impressive of the group. I didn’t have the body my friends had, but my long, curly red hair had always driven men crazy. A lot of the office creeps had approached me, and of course, I’d turned them all down. I didn’t want to get tied down with anyone. Like my friends, I just wanted to *live my life*.

The truth is, Antonio won all three of us over. After a long while of dancing — where Jessica wasn’t the only one who got to dance with him — we somehow ended up back at our place with that amazing guy without really realizing how it happened.

We lived in a shared apartment in the center of the city. It was a fantastic place in one of the best neighborhoods, really well connected. The rent was expensive, sure, but since the three of us split it and we had no family responsibilities, we could easily afford it.

As soon as we got home, Jessica pulled out some glasses and poured drinks. With the latest hits playing at full volume, the four of us started dancing again, laughing nonstop.

Eventually we were exhausted and collapsed onto the couch. Antonio sat in the middle, with Jessica and Emily on either side of him, and me in the armchair across from them. That's when our guest pulled out a small glass vial.

"What's that?" Emily asked.

"It's liquid ecstasy," I answered. "Can't you tell?"

"No, it's not that," Antonio replied. "It's something better. It doesn't knock you out like that crap. It just gives you a little boost and makes you... well, feel really good."

He dropped a few drops into his drink and downed it in one gulp.

"I want some too," Jessica said, and the guy put a few drops in hers as well.

"You have to drink it all in one go for it to kick in."

My friend didn't waste any time obeying, and Emily was next to try it. When it was my turn, I wasn't so sure and asked:

"But what exactly does it do?"

"It's just a little boost. Nothing more," Antonio said as he added a couple of drops to my drink. "You'll see how much fun the four of us are going to have."

I hesitated, but in the end I drank it. What could go wrong? The guy was charming, he had taken it too. Besides, I was on the pill just like my friends.

After that, he pulled Jessica up to dance again. The pounding rhythm of the music didn't stop the two of them from starting to kiss passionately. Both Emily and I joined the dancing while she took turns kissing with the other. I stayed a bit more to the side, still not feeling the "little boost" Antonio had promised.

Before long, Jessica took him to her bedroom, while Emily and I kept dancing for a while longer. Eventually, Emily motioned to join the two of them and signaled for me to come too. If we were going to interrupt, it was better to do it together so they wouldn't get upset. But I declined:

"I think I'm just gonna go to bed."

"Me too. But with these two," she said, turning off the music.

"I'm going alone. I'm starting to get a headache."

"Seriously? I feel like I'm on a cloud! I don't know what the hell we drank, but I'm so horny..."

"Have fun, and tell me about it tomorrow," I said as I went into my room and closed the door.

For some strange reason, drugs never agreed with me. It wasn't that I had taken them a lot, but every time I had tried something, instead of feeling those supposed "positive" effects, I usually just got headaches or nausea.

I barely managed to put on my pajamas and lay down on the bed while the room spun around me. On one hand, I envied my friends, who sounded like they were having the time of their lives as per the laughter and little moans coming through the wall. For a moment I thought about joining them, since it wouldn't be the first time we'd had an orgy in the apartment. But I really wasn't in the mood.

Eventually I think I fell asleep... and that's when I had the most supernatural experience of my entire life.

I was in some undefined place, wearing the same pajamas I had gone to bed in. It was like an enormous room at sunset, although there were no windows or any visible source of light. From the far end, a figure started getting bigger as it approached me. I couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman, or how old it might be. All I know is that it had strange eyes that seemed to stare into infinity with a somewhat disturbing gaze and a pale face. It wore a white tunic that showed a lot of its shoulders and reached down to its ankles, and it was barefoot, just like me. It was roughly my height, with short, slightly curly blond hair. It was clearly a being from beyond the grave. It stopped beside me and stood completely still while I didn't dare look at it directly, only glancing at it out of the corner of my eye.

The being remained like that for a few seconds, completely still, not even blinking, though not entirely motionless. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see its hands moving slightly.

Finally, since I hate uncertainty and I'm a curious person, I asked:

"Who are you?"

The being turned to look at me and answered:

"My name be Effekadesh, and I am thy guardian angel."

"My guardian... angel?"

"Yea. But thou mayest call me Jeff."

The Pianist

Effekadesh took me by the hand, and at that moment, the scene changed dramatically. Now we were floating in the air, but it wasn't Earth's atmosphere. It was somewhere else. A place that kept the same lighting as the previous room, perhaps a little darker, as if dusk was about to fall. We were floating, but I didn't feel any air or wind around us. It was all like a vast, immense void with no point of reference, where there was only him and me.

"Where are we?" I asked, a little scared.

"We are in Purgatory, Michelle."

"In... Purgatory? Seriously? That actually exists?"

"Thou shalt see it now."

Once again, he grabbed my hand firmly, and without knowing how, the scene changed again. Now we were in a room similar to the huge one from the beginning, with slightly brighter lighting and a very high ceiling. The only difference was that now I could hear soft piano notes.

It was a very beautiful melody, though somewhat melancholic. Effekadesh made me walk forward across a checkered floor of shiny black and white tiles. The notes grew clearer with every step. That's when I saw where they were coming from.

It was a very beautiful woman dressed in a wedding gown. A slender woman with graceful arms emerging from a perfectly fitted lace dress. Her dark hair shone with highlights while a high ponytail swayed gently to the rhythm of the music. With long fingers, she softly caressed the piano keys as tears slid down her cheeks and fell in tiny droplets onto the keyboard.

It seemed like far too large a space for just one pianist and her instrument. That's when I realized she wasn't alone. About ten steps behind her sat a large sofa where a man remained in silence.

It was the groom. Or at least, a young man around the same age as the woman, wearing an elegant black tuxedo with a shiny white silk shirt.

The man was looking at the woman, who had her back to him, but he wasn't really seeing her. It was as if he were looking through her while listening attentively to that sad melody.

"Who are these people, Jeff?" I asked, full of curiosity.

"Arthur and Dorothy. They are husband and wife. They died long ago. Fortunately for them, they were able to confess before their deaths, and therefore they are here."

"I don’t understand anything. What are they doing?"

"As I have told thee, they are man and wife. The sacred bond of matrimony joined them forever; yet in truth, they never truly knew one another. They never fully gave themselves to each other, for they withheld something most important: the power to create life. They were not generous, neither with themselves nor in giving life to others. They willingly made themselves sterile by using contraceptives."

I looked at him while he gazed at the couple with a sad expression. He still hadn’t fully answered my question, so I let him continue.

"They did not surrender themselves completely, reserving for themselves something as vital in marriage as fertility. They turned their sexual relations into pure hedonism, stripping them of all meaning and making them akin to masturbation."

"And for this reason, they are condemned to remain together for all the time they spend here—which, as I said, has already been several centuries. But they cannot look at or touch one another. They can only behold each other from behind for the duration of their atonement. He spends the nights seated in that armchair, contemplating and listening to his wife play the piano, while during the day she listens to him recite poetry. Melancholic poems, full of feeling, sadness, and lamentation, as they await the day of their deliverance."

"When will that be?"

"Only God knoweth. Tomorrow, when the dawn comes, thou mayest hear one of those poems."

"And what would happen if he stood up and tried to touch her?"

"He could not. His hands would pass through the air as if nothing were there."

"And if he walked over to see her from the front?"

"He would see nothing. Only the piano and the empty bench."

"And if she did it?"

"If she turned around right now, she would see an empty sofa. She can only contemplate him from behind during the day, and only when he turns around. This is the price they pay for not having truly known each other on Earth. Now, they do not know each other either."

"Why does it have to be like this?"

Effekadesh sighed and looked at me with a mixture of pity and compassion. His large eyes opened even wider, and he said:

"Marriage requireth an unconditional surrender of the spouses, and these two have deliberately failed to do so. They have robbed one another of a part of themselves—that is, they have not given themselves in fullness. And the deeds of men in Time are fixed in Eternity, so that he who hath done good shall enjoy its benefits forever, but his evils shall also pursue him eternally. In this case, their selfishness and lack of generosity."

"Only here in Purgatory" he continued, "if the proper conditions are met, is a second chance granted, which always leadeth to Heaven. Though verily, it must pass through the purification thou seest before thee. Nothing unclean can enter the Kingdom of God."

"Why are they dressed as bride and groom?" I asked after listening a little longer to that sad melody.

"Because bride and groom should marry as virgins. And since these two did not know each other in fullness, it is as if they have not yet consummated their marriage. It is similar to the typical anxiety of newlyweds, who burn with desire for the wedding to end so they may fully know one another. The anxiety these two suffer is very similar, for they burn with desire for their purgation to end so they may love each other and love God. The difference is that newlyweds know when the wedding will end so the moment of joy may arrive, but these, to their misfortune, do not."

We remained silent for a while, watching that sad scene, until something occurred to me.

"Jeff, that can’t be. If these two have been here for centuries, they couldn’t have used contraceptives. Those weren’t invented until the 20th century."

Effekadesh turned slowly and smiled faintly. A sad smile that turned the corners of his small mouth slightly downward.

"Michelle, in Eternity there is no time. They were born in the twentieth century, yet that doth not prevent them from having been here for several centuries."

"You mean you and I have traveled to the future?"

"Yea, thou mayest see it that way."

I still didn’t fully understand how that was possible, but I couldn’t think about it any longer. Once again, the angel took me firmly by the hand, and the scene changed once more.

Desolation

Now we were outdoors, standing in a landscape. It was a desolate, devastated scene, as if the four horsemen of the Apocalypse had ridden over it. There was no grass or vegetation of any kind; only a few dry, broken trees scattered here and there, dotting the vast terrain like points—or rather, black slashes. This actually looked like Earth, a devastated Earth, though perhaps at a very primal level.

Effekadesh slowly turned his head to the right with an almost solemn movement. Intrigued, I followed his gaze. What I saw took my breath away: a path—or rather, several paths that branched out like dry roots across the arid ground. Some were wider, others so narrow that barely a body could fit through. People moved along them with a heaviness that hurt to watch, dragging themselves along with no strength, unable to see one another or exchange even a single word. The silence was thick, as if each person was trapped in their own universe of suffering.

“Jeff, are all these people dead?”

“Yes, they are”

“But, they look so alive!”

“Because they really *are* alive!”

“How so?” I asked, but he didn’t answer. Instead, he gazed to the people, as if the reply was to be found among them.

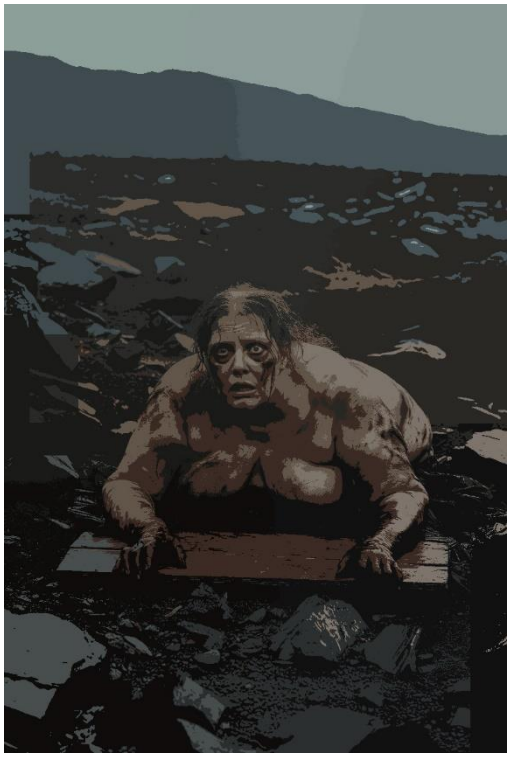
My eyes fell upon a figure that struck me to the core: a woman, not too old, but with a body ravaged by obesity and exhaustion. She trudged along, legsless, her buttocks resting on a wooden plank that seemed as rough as the path itself. She propelled herself only with her arms, which served as crutches, and each movement was a losing battle against the pain. The stony ground, riddled with obstacles, turned every step forward into endless torture.

The woman was naked, like all the other souls, and her tears fell ceaselessly, streaming down her face like rivers of despair. I stood watching her, feeling something inside me break. This time I didn't ask Jeff; curiosity and compassion propelled me forward. I may have many flaws, but timidity has never been one of them. I've always been outgoing, daring, and now that part of me was taking over.

I approached the side of the road, my heart pounding, and spoke to her in a firm voice, though I was trembling inside.

"What happened to you?"

The lady stopped. Her arms hung suspended in the air, and she slowly lifted her head, as if it took great effort to break free from the invisible weight crushing her. Her eyes, red and filled with tears, moved around searching for the source of my voice. I soon realized she couldn’t see me. There was a mix of surprise and exhaustion in her gaze, like someone hearing an unexpected echo in the middle of the desert.



"Ye are in different dimensions, Michelle," Effekadesh explained, positioning himself beside me with his luminous and serene presence. "That is why."

I nodded, though my curiosity remained strong. I leaned a little closer toward her, as if that gesture could shorten the distance between our worlds.

"Why don’t you have legs?" I asked bluntly.

The woman took a deep breath, and her shoulders trembled slightly. Then she began to speak, wiping away her tears with the back of her hand in a gesture that seemed practiced from repeating it so many times.

"When I got married," she said in a broken but firm voice, wiping her tears with the back of her hand, "I set aside my individuality. That is, I stopped being just me, and together with my husband I became something bigger, fuller, more complete: we became a family. And that is a joint endeavor in which a person very often has to abandon the 'I' so that the 'we' may survive."

The woman spoke as if she were reciting a lesson. As if she had memorized it and now was the moment to deliver it to whoever asked.

"What’s your name?" I asked gently.

"My name is Beatrice," she replied, her voice cracking slightly as she said her name, as if the sound reminded her of something lost. "As I said, I stopped being the person I was in order to form a family. A family to which I, as an inseparable part of that new reality, had to dedicate myself completely—just as I used to dedicate myself to my own needs. Because

my husband was no longer a separate and different person; he had become part of me, of the new reality that I now was. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Young lady, from your voice I can tell you're young. What I've described is called 'belonging'. My husband belonged to me and I belonged to him. But mind you, it's not the same kind of belonging one has toward a house, a piece of land, or a piece of furniture. Because if you lose those things, you really haven't lost anything. But if you lose, say, a leg or an arm—that is a real loss! An irretrievable loss, forever. That is the kind of belonging that Christian marriage refers to, and that is why separation makes no sense at all, because it would be equivalent to an amputation."

"I think I understand now," I said, looking at the place where her legs should have been.

"In short," she continued, "I may have a leg that doesn't work properly, that has bad tendons or arthritis. But it's *my* leg, and I cannot replace it with an 'orthopedic' one, which will always, always be worse, simply because it isn't mine."

"Thus it is, Michelle," Effekadesh confirmed. Beatrice looked at him, scanning him from head to toe. Apparently, souls in Purgatory *can* see angels. "Jesus Himself told you when He was on Earth: 'For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall cleave unto his wife; and they twain shall be one flesh. Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh.'"

"'What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder,'" Beatrice completed. "'Whosoever shall put away his wife, and marry another, committeth adultery against her. And if a woman shall put away her husband, and be married to another, she committeth adultery.'"

"Correct. Dost thou understand why divorce is not possible, Michelle?" Jeff asked, looking at me with that disconcerting calm.

"I think so. It's because they are already one, right?"

"It is so. Consider this example: thou likest milk with sugar, and thou always preparest a glass before going to sleep."

"Yes. How do you know that?" I opened my eyes in surprise and smiled slightly.

"I am thy guardian angel. I know everything about thee."

"Ah, of course," I replied, feeling a strange warmth in my chest. It was comforting, yet unsettling, to know that someone knew me so well.

"When thou stirrest a spoonful into the glass, once the mixture is dissolved, it becomes impossible to separate its components again. Thou canst not recover the powdered sugar as it was in the beginning. Canst thou?"

"No, of course not."

"Now the mixture is something else. It is neither milk nor sugar. It is milk with sugar."

"Obviously."

A middle-aged man had been standing nearby for a while, listening to our conversation. I hadn't noticed him at first, but his presence became obvious when I saw his sunken, dull eyes fixed on Effekadesh with a mix of respect and pleading. The man had no arms and was carrying a small container between his teeth. Inside was some kind of liquid. It was the size of a small glass, wider than it was tall, and he held it by biting down on a wire that served as a handle.

The man looked at Effekadesh, who gave a slight nod of his head, as if granting him permission to speak to me. He carefully bent his knees, lowering the container to the ground without spilling its contents, then straightened up again and began to speak:

"Another example—" he said, looking toward where my voice was coming from. "Well, first let me introduce myself. I'm Edward."

"Nice to meet you," I replied, trying to make my voice sound warm, though inside I felt a sharp pang of compassion.

"Anyway, what I was getting at… I can be a soldier who belongs to an army and fights in a war. I can complain about my captain or the generals. I can criticize the way they fight or the strategy they're following. I might even be right. But under no circumstances is it an option for me to 'switch armies,' simply because there isn't another one, and I'm fighting for my country. Do you understand?"

"Yes," I answered, following his reasoning. I'm not exactly a fan of marriage, but I understood the logic behind his words. I was surprised by how, even in the middle of all this suffering, they still defended these principles with such firmness.

Edward nodded, and his eyes lit up just a little, as if my response gave him some relief.

"In other words, I can't defect to the enemy and start fighting against my own side, because that would be an act of high treason. What I *can* do, if my comrades have died or been captured, if the enemy has defeated us and I still want to keep fighting for a just cause, is form another army with new soldiers and continue the fight."

He looked at me, or rather, he looked to the right of Effekadesh, and then I asked:

"Yes, I understand. In that case, it would be like remarrying if your wife has died. By the way, what are you carrying in that container?" I looked at the ground, where he had left it while he was speaking to me.

"It's my seed," he answered, ashamed. "I deposited it in a place I shouldn't have, and now I have to return it to its rightful owner… my wife."

"Is the… rightful owner waiting for you?" I asked cautiously.

"I don't know. Only God knows. I begged Him to forgive me right before I died, and thanks to that, I was able to save my soul."

"Save your soul? But… haven't you died?"

"Of course I've died! What a stupid question!" he replied. "If I hadn't, I wouldn't have been walking around this place for one hundred and thirty years, nine months, eight days, and fourteen hours, carrying this thing between my teeth."

"Right, right," I stammered. "And… what would happen if you spilled… your seed? Has that ever happened to you?"

"Oh! Many times! They could've at least given me a glass with a lid! Just last week, for example. I was about to reach the top of those mountains over there—" he looked at them, and I turned to look as well—"I had already made it past the steepest slopes… which, as you can imagine, is no easy task when you're barefoot, naked, and have no arms."

I turned back around. Yes, they were tall mountains with snow on their peaks. That was the entire landscape: mountains and valleys, one after another.

"And then… did you spill it?"

"Yeah. Like I said, I had already gotten past the worst part and—bam! A really dumb slip, and the whole seed spilled out."

"And what happened?"

"What do you think happened? Back to square one! You have to wait until the next day for the glass to fill up again, and then climb the mountain all over again. No other choice! And I'm not even one of the worst off, you know! Some angels have told me that a lot of men have to carry much bigger and heavier containers."

"Of course," Effekadesh interjected. "It all dependeth on how many times they have spilled their seed in women who were not their wives."

"Exactly. I don't know how some of them manage to carry so much weight with their teeth."

"That is because they must make several trips," Jeff explained.

"Several trips?" Edward's eyes widened in shock. "If I, who only cheated on my wife once, have already been here for 130 years… how long have those people been here then?"

"Centuries, Edward. Many centuries," Effekadesh replied solemnly. "But it all dependeth on the individual cases. There are always aggravating and mitigating factors."

"Of course," Edward murmured.

"For example," Jeff continued, "it's not the same to be seduced by a prostitute without having actively sought it out, as it is to have forced on a teenage girl."

"Yes, of course," he understood. "Or to have committed adultery with a niece, or even with a daughter."

"What a horror!" I said with a look of disgust. "How long have those monsters been here then?" I asked.

"The few who are not in Hell... thousands of years," Jeff replied in a grave voice.

"How awful!" I exclaimed. The armless man nodded. Then I couldn't resist asking him:

"And, if it's not too personal... in your case..."

"I cheated on my wife with a neighbor... and I pursued her actively, to my misfortune. But it was only once! You hear me? It was only once!"

"Yes, yes. I believe you," I said, trying to sound understanding. "But if it was only once, that's just a slip-up... Why did you end up without arms? Didn't you go back to your wife?"

The man looked away, ashamed.

"You don't have to answer if you don't want to," I added gently.

"No, shame is something we no longer have here," he replied bitterly. "If you're seeing me like this—naked, without arms, skinny, gaunt... what does it matter anymore!" The man paused, then said:

"The truth is I did reject her. I abandoned her and then slept with my neighbor... who was a woman who had just moved in, very attractive, much younger than me and my wife, and... of course... I had a heart attack right after finishing."

"Ah!" I exclaimed, not knowing what to say.

"I didn't die *during* the act... by a miracle! Do you know how long it had been since I'd had something like that?"

"I can imagine..."

"The heart attack left me in pretty bad shape. I didn't even last a full day! Thank God my daughter managed to get a priest to see me before I died, because if not..."

"If not, what?"

"What do you think? If it hadn't been for that, right now I'd be burning in Hell for all Eternity."

"Ah, I see," I said, with a lump in my throat.

"Girl, this is hard, but at least someday it will end."

"Yeah. Well, I wish you a lot of luck," I replied sincerely.

"Thank you very much," he sighed. "Anyway, I have to get going. I hope I can reach those mountains up ahead before dawn."

"You don't sleep?"

"Ha! Nobody sleeps here! We can't afford to. Time spent sleeping is time wasted. Do you understand?"

I did not understand completely, and said:

"Well, hurry up. I wish you lots of luck and that you find your wife soon so you can give her your seed."

"I hope so," he sighed. "Honestly, I don't know if she's here or if she's already in Heaven (I hope she's not in Hell). But I'm certain that one day I'll find her, give her this, and be reunited with her for all Eternity."

The man bent down, bit the handle of the small pot again, stood up, and continued on his way without looking back. I watched him walk away, his silhouette blending into the vast grayness of Purgatory like just another shadow in that endless landscape.

"Hey, Jeff," I asked once he was far enough away, "do you know where this man's wife is?"

"I know not. Just as I know not where Beatrice's husband is. Normally, if both are in Purgatory, their times of atonement are made to coincide. Then Edward will deliver his seed to its rightful owner, and Beatrice will receive her legs from her husband. Afterward, both spouses will ascend to Heaven. And if one of them were already there, he or she would come down to collect the other."

"And if they were in Hell? Could they still come?"

"From there no one can leave. In that case, Edward would deliver his seed directly to God, and remain with Him. The same would happen to Beatrice. It would be the Lord Himself who would restore her legs."

"How I wish that moment would come!" exclaimed the woman, who was still stopped there. Then I asked her:

"And you, ma'am, were you also able to save your soul?"

"Indeed I was! And I owe it all to my guardian angel. Oh my God! Send him to me more often, for it has been a long time since I last saw him!"

"I believe he visited thee yesterday," Effekadesh corrected. "He is a friend of mine and hath told me."

"Was it yesterday? Yes, it could be. He comes from time to time and comforts me. If it hadn't been for Marilíadesh..."

"How did she save you?" I asked, intrigued.

"It was in the hospital. The chaplain would pass by the rooms from time to time looking for the dying to give them extreme unction. You know, the sacrament. But the family members would chase him away. Mine did it quite rudely, in fact. But Marilíadesh never stopped working to find the right moment, and she found it, right at the very limit..."

"What happened?"

"They went to lunch. The doctor had told them I was stable within the gravity of my condition, and they thought I wouldn't die at that moment. Oh my God!" The woman began to cry with deep compunction. "How many thanks I give Thee for saving me! How much I owe Thee and Thy angel!"

Beatrice wiped her tears again and continued:

"At that moment the priest appeared and said to me: 'Do you want to receive the anointing of the sick?' I said yes. After all, what did I have to lose? I knew I was going to die, because not even the surgery had managed to get rid of that damn cancer that had started in my breasts and had already spread throughout my entire body..."

"You have very beautiful breasts," I comforted her, and it was true. Even though she was an older woman, her breasts were full and firm, as if she were a teenager.

"They amputated both of them, and even that didn't stop the cancer."

"They amputated them?"

"Yes, dear. The Lord restores in the Afterlife everything that *He* takes away, but... Oh! What *we* amputate ourselves... that is much harder to recover...!"

"Your husband."

"Yes, that's right. I've been dragging myself along these paths for many years now, trying to find my legs, but only God knows when I will. I divorced my husband over a silly little thing, and now look at me, dear. Walking—well, calling it walking is generous—dragging myself! along these roads full of stones as sharp as knives, pushing them aside as best I can just to keep moving forward."

"Moving forward... toward where?"

"Always forward," she answered with determination. "Do you see those mountains in the distance?"

I looked. They appeared bluish because of how far away they were.

"I must have covered a distance like that about eight hundred times, dragging my backside on this board."

I was stunned.

"And why did you get divorced? You told me earlier it was over a 'trifle.'"

The woman stared silently in my direction (or rather, toward the spot where my voice was coming from) and then said:

"Until recently, I would have given you this answer: 'Well, when we women reach a certain age, say around fifty, we go through strong hormonal changes that make us more irritable, and we can no longer tolerate things that didn't used to bother us as much. For example, the husband always leaving the toilet seat up, not helping with housework, or preferring to stay home watching football instead of going out with his wife. In those circumstances, any spark can set off a fire that had already accumulated too much fuel.'"

"Was that what happened?"

"That's exactly what happened. I started denying him access to this body—" she looked down at herself—"which is his and therefore should be at his disposal. Just as his body is mine and I should be able to use it whenever I see fit."

"And what if he—or she—doesn't feel like it?"

"We are one. There is no longer ‘he’ or ‘I,’ because we are one and the same. If your right hand itches, wouldn’t you scratch it with your left hand, even if you had something better to do? Yes, right?"

I nodded.

"Whatever else you had to do would have to be very important for you to stop. Well," she continued, "that was only the beginning. It made him more irritable too, and then I became even more so. Eventually we argued for the hundredth time and I threw him out of the house. I told him: ‘You see this door? Take a good look at it, because you’re never going to see it again in your entire life.’"

"You said that to him?"

"Yes, I did. And I kept my word. He never saw that door again, though other men did. Men who, by the way, turned out to be, if not the same, at least very similar. Prince Charming doesn’t exist."

"Of course he doesn’t. I already know that."

"In the end I found myself in complete solitude, cursing my luck—a luck I had brought upon myself."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because when the terrible days of my illness came, there was no one there to comfort me or give me a kiss. My husband might have been boring, lazy, and dull. But he wasn’t a bad man."

"I see. And why did you say earlier that you no longer give that answer? All that about the difficult age, the hormonal changes, and so on. What answer would you give now?"

"That was an excuse I made for myself. The idea that I was at a bad age and that living together wears you down was just a way to try to justify what I did. That’s what I thought when I first arrived here: that I had been forced by circumstances."

"Well, wasn’t that actually the case?"

"No, it wasn’t," she sighed as another tear escaped her eyes. "The truth is that I was selfish and only thought about myself. It’s what I told you before. The family is a unit, and when you separate, you hurt others—not to mention the children. In reality, you hurt yourself." She looked down at the place where her legs should have been. "I only thought about me, and in the end I ended up worse off than before: I was left alone, bitter, frustrated, and sick, with no one by my side. I deserve this punishment, and it took me a long time to understand that."

The woman made a move to turn and continue on her way, despite being in truly pitiful condition.

"Why don’t you stop a little longer? Aren’t you tired?"

"Of course I'm tired! I'm dead tired! Can't you see my wounds?" She showed them to me. Her knuckles and the palms of her hands were bloody, since they were her only means of propulsion. "But if I stopped," she continued, "my time here would also be extended."

"How much would it be extended?"

"All the time I remained stopped."

"And wouldn't it be better? So you could continue later with more energy?"

"More energy, you say? More energy than I already have?" She turned toward the angel. "Tell her, angel."

"No. Better thou tell her, Beatrice."

The woman sighed and said:

"Look, young lady. I cannot stop because I am devoured, consumed, and prevented by the burning desire I have to be with God at last, to enjoy Him for all eternity in His presence. That is why I cannot stop. Do you understand, child?"

"Yeah."

"I can stop to talk to you for a few minutes, as I am doing now, and only because I believe it benefits me; because it must please God in some way that I speak with you at this moment, since nothing here is by chance."

The woman wiped her tears again and licked the wounds on her knuckles, preparing to continue. This time she rested on the palms of her hands, which, although also destroyed by abrasion, were not as badly lacerated. I felt so much pity that I tried to help her, but Effekadesh stopped me.

"No, Michelle. Thou canst not. Not only can they not see thee, but they cannot touch thee, nor canst thou touch them. Thou must let her purge her sins for as long as God willeth."

Then he took me firmly by the hand again, and as if by magic, we appeared in another place.

The Rain

This time it was fully nighttime, and we were in a landscape similar to the previous one, but with a notable difference: now it was raining. It was a persistent rain, sometimes heavier, sometimes lighter—occasionally a downpour, other times just a drizzle. The moisture created a kind of mist that, combined with the darkness, made visibility very poor.

Even so, we could still see the penitents. Here there were no paths. Instead, they wandered erratically across the desolate landscape with no apparent direction. They looked like zombies that wouldn't stop moaning, and every now and then they would throw themselves on the ground and roll around in the mud. They were naked, and there were almost as many men as women. These people were clearly suffering more than the others. There seemed to be no possible comfort for them.

"Who are they?" I asked Effekadesh.

"They are fornicators."

"What?"

"People who have had sexual relations with others while not being married."

"Single people, then."

"Yea, of course. If they copulated with someone who was married, then the other party would not be a fornicator but an adulterer—or adulteress—and would be with the group we saw before."

"Even if they repented?"

"No. In that case, if the adulterer hath returned, or hath attempted to return—even if unsuccessful—to his or her spouse, God forgiveth them and they would be in another place. A different place where they would purge their guilt and the sin committed."

"Wait, Jeff, I'm not quite getting it. Are you saying that if an adulterer or adulteress repents, they are forgiven?"

"Behold, things are not simply white or black. There are many mitigating factors, and also aggravating ones. If a woman, for example, repenteth of having committed adultery, of having cast her husband out of her life, and desireth to return to him but he rejecteth her, her guilt is greatly lessened."

"As long as she doesn't go back to another man afterward, right?"

"Exactly, Michelle. I see thou art beginning to understand. She remaineth married, and she respecteth her body, which belongeth not to her but to her husband. She doth not give it to another man, for that would be stealing from her husband what rightfully belongeth to him—just as thine arms or thy legs belong to thee."

"Yes, yes, I already understood that. But even if she was the reason her husband went off with someone else, and therefore he committed adultery with that third person?"

"The husband would then be an adulterer and would be in the previous place. She would not be an adulteress, but she would still be responsible for an adultery, and would be purging her sins in another place. The place where those who have harmed others dwell, or those who, through their fault, caused others to be condemned to Hell. Those people suffer unspeakably, as thou shalt soon see."

"The ones in Hell?"

"No. We shall not go there. I refer to those who suffer in Purgatory. They are called 'the causers.' Indeed, they are the ones who have been in this place the longest, and dost thou know what? They embrace those sufferings and desire to make them even greater because of all the remorse they feel. Only God's mercy can, one day, deliver them from here."

"Yeah, of course. It's impossible to leave Hell, isn't it?"

"It is so. The damned suffer horrible remorse there that gives them no rest. So much so that they will never leave that place, among other reasons, because they will never accept God's mercy."

"Why?"

"Because their sins are so great that they cover them completely. Nothing healthy remaineth in them that can heal the rest. And this is because they died without repenting of anything or asking God's forgiveness. Their will becometh fixed at the moment of death, and there is no longer any possibility of remission. The horror suffered in that place is indescribable, Michelle."

I swallowed hard. Hell had to be a terrible place, much worse than Purgatory seemed to be. Even in this rainy area where we were now, the people appeared to be suffering quite a lot. The rain, I noticed when a drop fell on my lips, was salty water.

"This place is pretty bad too..." I commented, judging by the moans and the way the fornicators were rolling around on the ground.

"Ah! There is no comparison, Michelle. These penitents know that they will eventually reach Heaven, and now they suffer for seeing themselves so stained with iniquity."

"Why do they have those sores?" I asked, seeing them covered in wounds. The wounds, by the way, were made even more painful by the salty water.

"They have defiled their bodies with fornication. The body of a man or a woman may only be used sexually by their legitimate spouse. That is why. Outside of marriage, no one may dare enter that sacred space."

"But, in reality... isn't it the same?" I asked, suddenly realizing that I myself was also a fornicator. "If two people love each other..."

"No, Michelle. If two people love each other, what they must do is marry. It is like taking a bath. One can bathe in a pool of holy water, for that is what marriage is—a place that anoints the spouses with that holy sacrament, which is made real every time they know each other and make love. It is a very different thing to immerse oneself in a filthy, stinking mud pit. Dost thou understand?"

"Yes, of course. In that last case, one can come out sick. Isn't that right?"

"It is so. All these people are sick—" he looked at them—"and they roll around in the mud trying to heal themselves, for they consider themselves wretched and worthy of all reproof. The place on their body where a stranger touched them for illicit purposes hath developed a sore that will not heal or close for all the time they remain here."

I looked more closely despite the darkness and could see that many of those poor souls were nothing but walking sores. There was practically no healthy part left on their entire bodies. Not to mention their genitals, whose appearance was truly horrifying to look at because of how badly damaged they were.

"But why does it have to be this way? Why such a severe punishment? What makes marriage so important?"

"It is the efficacy of the sacrament, Michelle, and how few people give it the importance it deserves. Wherever God placeth His seal, nothing remaineth as it was before. An act such as copulation is transformed into a holy act, an act that He willeth and desireth, provided it remaineth open to life. Not even priests have the privilege of making use of it. It is a sacrament that imparteth grace, that giveth strength to the spouses to advance together toward God in fullness, so that they may later enjoy Him and enjoy each other eternally in the company of the blessed. There is no comparison between that and the fornication these fools pursued, which hath brought them here."

They truly were pitiful, and then I asked:

"Can't God take pity on them? They seem so repentant..."

"And they are, Michelle. They are. Indeed, God taketh pity on them. The state of compunction and the suffering they endure is so great that they are the ones who spend the least

time in this place. The fire of Purgatory consumeth them quickly, and thus they are purified faster. Generally speaking, that is. Others pass from here to other places, to other levels, to redeem the guilt of different sins. Or perhaps they come from there already, and this is their final level."

"I see. Nobody commits just one kind of sin, do they?"

"Unfortunately, that is so. But keep this in mind: they are here because they repented before dying and asked God's forgiveness, even if imperfectly—that is, without confession. Those who do not repent..."

"Yeah, I know, I know. They're in the other place, the one you're not going to take me to."

Then I noticed he was about to squeeze my hand tightly, which only meant he was going to take me somewhere else.

"Wait a moment!" I stopped him. "Why are these women dressed?" I asked, pointing to a group of people to our right. They passed close by, so I could see them clearly.

"Dost thou think they are dressed?"

"Yes, aren't they?"

They certainly were dressed. They were wearing clothes like the ones I usually wear in summer, and sometimes in winter. They had on miniskirts and low-cut tops, and some were walking in bikinis or even topless. The salty rain was also stinging their sores, though these only appeared in the areas not covered by clothing.

"Do you remember what I told thee before?"

"What exactly?"

"I told thee that outside of marriage, no one may dare enter the sacred space that the body of the spouses representeth."

"Right. These are fornicators, of course."

"No, they are not. If they were, they would be naked. Or they may also be fornicators, but at this moment they are not purging the sin of fornication, but the sin of immodesty."

"Immodesty? What is that?"

"Immodesty consisteth in publicly displaying certain parts of the female anatomy, even partially."

"What parts?"

"Thou canst well imagine. And not only displaying them, but also suggesting them."

"So, dressing in a 'provocative' way. Is that it?"

"It is so."

"But Jeff, how can that still apply? Things have moved on. How is it possible that this is still considered a sin?"

"Ah, that is the typical question many people ask: 'If the world hath changed, why doth not God change?'"

"Well, yes."

"Michelle, it is very good to advance in medicine, in technology, in making a better and more prosperous world for human beings. But moral laws are eternal, and they have been given by God for the good of His children. Do not forget that."

"Honestly, I don't know what harm it can do to show a little cleavage, for example."

"It harmeth men, even if it may seem otherwise. Female immodesty damageeth men in a very pernicious way, causing them to desire other women and not their own."

"Well, I don't think that just because of that..."

"Because of that and because of what the conjugal union meaneth and implieth. It is what I told thee before. No one may enter the sacred space that is a woman's body, not even with their eyes. Only her husband may do so. Only her spouse may see her nakedness, and she his. Remember that they are one flesh, and it is as if they were seeing themselves."

"But, Jeff, here in Purgatory the rule about immodesty doesn't apply. Almost everyone is naked..."

"Yea, but they do not see one another. Except when it is necessary for their purification, logically, as in the case of Arthur and Dorothy."

"And besides, those two were dressed—as bride and groom—and they could only see each other from behind, by the way."

"It is so. And they could not touch each other, remember."

"Yeah, yeah."

"Michelle, nakedness is also a form of purgation, for here it representeth deprivation. Naked ye came into the world, and naked ye leave it. Who hath not had attachment to their possessions or their money? Ah? Thus these souls in purgation realize where all of that remaineth when they die. Nothing they accumulated on Earth is kept for the Afterlife; no riches, except that which enricheth the soul."

At that moment, I thought about the huge amount of clothes and dresses I owned. I never repeated an outfit from one season to the next, because even though my salary wasn't especially high, it was more than enough to buy myself all kinds of luxuries. That was the good part about not having children or family members depending on me. The money was all mine.

"Besides, Michelle, this is a place of purgation, and those who purge and expiate their miseries *are* miserable—the word itself saith so—and therefore they have nothing and lack everything. They don't even have clothes to keep warm when it is cold or to cover their skin so the sun does not burn them. And as if that were not enough, as thou canst see, there is no food here, and all of them are famished and starving."

"Well, almost all of them. Beatrice wasn't exactly thin."

"Gluttony is also a sin. There are many who eat until they are stuffed, and in doing so they take away the necessary food that others lack and need. Here, those extra pounds become a burden, an obstacle that preventeth them from moving with the necessary speed to reach their destination. And that maketh them take longer to meet God."

"Yes, I understand. That poor woman didn't have legs and on top of that she was obese. How long is it going to take her to reach her destination?"

"Well... imagine..."

I observed the women wandering around us—the ones who were "dressed." Most of them were thin and starving, with breasts that were little more than sagging, ulcerated skin. It was true that there were also some obese ones, with no middle ground. I looked at myself too. Unlike Jessica and Emily, I was also a bit chubby because I ate until I was full, especially certain things I loved.

"But then, what are we supposed to do? Starve?"

"No. One must give the body what it needeth. No more, no less. Michelle, your bodies do not belong to you. Thou canst not say 'I can do whatever I want with my body,' because they are not yours. They have simply been given to you as a dwelling place for the soul; that is, so that ye may have a place to inhabit while ye remain on Earth."

"Yeah, yeah," I understood. "Anyway, Jeff—" I looked around, "if there's no food here, how is it possible that...?"

"Michelle, on Earth, hunger or cold can cause a person to die. But here that is impossible, for the simple reason that they are already dead."

"Ah, of course. And drinking? Can they drink?"

"No, not that either. There is no water here. When it rains, it is salty water."

"And what about the snow on the mountains? Can't they go there to drink?"

"If they have to cross a snowy mountain they will pass through it, of course, but none would deliberately deviate from their path just to drink."

"Don't they get thirsty, or what?"

"They 'die' of thirst, Michelle, but their true longing is to reach their destination once and for all. That is what moveth them above all else."

"Yeah, but..."

"They cannot even drink when they touch the snow."

"Why? Do they pass through it 'as if it were air'?"

"No. They touch it, and quite solidly. Since they are naked, and therefore barefoot, they suffer terribly from the cold."

"I can imagine... But then, why don't they drink it? If they put it in their mouths, it will melt and then..." And then I realized. "I know why they can't drink it: they have no body heat to melt the snow."

"Thou hast said it. The dead have no body heat. Nor can they wait for spring to come so the snow melts and forms rivers. Here the snow never melteth."

"Wow..."

Most of the women I was seeing now truly looked like walking corpses, and only the clothes some of them wore kept them from looking like little more than survivors of an extermination camp.

"And so," I continued, "the sin of these women was that they showed parts of their bodies to those they should not have. Right?"

"It is so."

"And therefore, they receive the same punishment as the fornicators, because in a certain sense they have done the same thing, don't they?" I was being a very attentive student and wasn't missing a single detail.

"Well, not exactly. It is not the same to be touched in certain parts as it is to be looked at."

"Of course it's not the same! But still, I don't see that their sores are any less deep or purulent than the others. How is that possible?"

I focused on the group of women who now had their backs to us. They weren't walking together—since in Purgatory no one can see anyone but themselves—but they had coincided in their erratic wandering through this place. Many of them had their buttocks and thighs completely covered in blood, especially the obese ones.

"I would tell thee, Michelle, that their suffering is even greater than that of the fornicators, and they themselves understand this when they arrive in this place and see it clearly."

"But I still don’t see it, Jeff. I don’t understand how showing a little cleavage or even your entire breasts..." I stopped. I had gone topless many times at the beach with my friends, and I suddenly saw myself reflected in some of those women. "I don’t understand how showing something can be more serious than letting someone touch you. Can you explain it to me?"

"Dost thou remember when I spoke earlier about the ‘causers’? They are people who, by their actions or omissions, have caused harm to others, or even caused others to be condemned—that is, to sin, and consequently end up in Purgatory. Or, what is worse, in Hell. The remorse these people feel maketh them suffer unspeakably."

"Yes, I understand that. But what exactly have these women done? Who has been condemned because of them? No matter how much men have looked at them or desired them, if those men remained faithful to their wives, I don’t understand how..."

"Married life suffereth, Michelle, and they begin to compare their wives with others, looking down on them. Something that would not happen if they had seen nothing. Dost thou understand? Jesus Himself said it. Hast thou not heard several times His teaching that ‘whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart’?"

"I don’t remember that."

"Thou hast heard that phrase on several occasions. For example, when thy grandmother took thee to Mass when thou wast little. And another time not so long ago, at a wedding—when one of thy cousins got married. I was with thee, and I heard it."

"Well, I don’t remember. I usually ‘tune out’ in those places."

"Yea, that often happeneth. But that doth not diminish the gravity of the sin. If a man cometh to desire a woman simply by looking at her, she is not at fault, for the sin is in him. But if she contributeth in any way to arousing his desire by doing something she could easily avoid, she is causing damage that may be irreparable. It is a very great evil that many women only understand when they arrive here."

"Maybe they’re not to blame, or they didn’t realize what they were causing." (I was saying this for myself, because I had never thought about any of this when I showed parts of my body.)

"Yea, it is possible. But to a certain extent they are guilty, for having turned a deaf ear to what the Church hath always recommended: to dress with modesty." He sighed. "Michelle, men tend to look with lust at a woman who showeth her thighs, or her breasts—even partially—or even without showing anything but wearing tight clothing. It is very easy under those conditions to break the ninth commandment, which sayeth ‘thou shalt not have impure thoughts or desires.’"

"Yeah, but there’s a difference between looking and having those desires."

"Think not that it is so simple. Women usually do not understand it, but for a man it is very difficult to overcome the temptation of having those thoughts every time he seeth certain things. It is inherent to their excitable physiology. The mechanism of desire is almost automatic."

"And how do you know that? Are you a man?"

"I am neither man nor woman. We angels are pure, incorporeal spirits. If thou seest me now with a human form, it is because I have adopted this human appearance so I may establish a better relationship with thee. So that thou mayest feel comfortable."

Comfortable, he says... I thought. *He looks actually like a ghost!* I said to myself as I looked at him. *If only he had taken the form of Brad Pitt or Leonardo DiCaprio... then I really would feel comfortable!*

"Okay, okay," I continued. "So, about men's desires? How do you know if you're not one of them?"

"Because I have spent a long time on Earth observing human behavior. And because we angels are superior to humans in intellect."

"In intellect?"

"Yes. There are other things in which ye surpass us, such as the love that God is capable of giving to His creatures. He sacrificed Himself on the Cross to save you, something He did not do for us."

"Is that a reproach?"

"No. It is simply stating a fact."

"Fine," I replied after a few moments. "I believe what you say about men's desires and their arousal."

"It is so," he insisted. "And as thou seest, God is very demanding in matters of sexuality, and He reserveth them exclusively for spouses."

"Yeah, yeah." I thought about it, and then a thought came to mind. "Now I understand why Muslim women cover themselves so much. It's because of this, right?"

"Indeed. So as not to do evil to men; so as not to harm their souls nor their own with that act of wickedness."

"Of wickedness?"

"Yes, Michelle, an act of wickedness. These women thou seest have been shown all the people who have been condemned, or who have sinned because of them—solely because of them. Many of those souls are here, redeeming their sins, and these women are to a certain extent responsible, at least for that specific sin, apart from others they may also have. Had they not shown their bodies to those they should not have, those people would not have sinned, and now that filleth them with remorse. Dost thou not think so?"

I didn't answer right away, and Effekadesh continued:

"Look at them... How they wish they had shown less! The parts they had not exposed would now be covered with clothing instead of filled with sores..."

"But they didn't know!" I insisted. "They can't be held responsible."

"If they did not know, that is a mitigating factor, and they will remain here only a short time. It is what I told thee. Nothing is purely white or black, and there are always aggravating and mitigating factors. The moment a soul hath purged its faults as gold is purified in the crucible, it is ready to see God."

I looked a little longer at those women. Some were already far away and barely visible, but others had turned around in their erratic wandering with no apparent destination, trying to find places or moments where it rained less so their sores wouldn't sting as much. They all looked sad and heavy-hearted, and they were no different from the fornicators except that they wore a bit more clothing.

That's when a thought crossed my mind:

"Jeff, what do you say about all those women who have shown themselves on television, in magazines, in movies...? How many men have they made sin?"

"Well... imagine..."

"And do they have to atone for every single person?"

"For every single person who hath sinned because of them, Michelle."

"Then there must be many who have been here for..."

"A very long time, yes. Is it not sad? There is even a special place where all those souls dwell who have publicly shown their bodies in the very act of fornication through the media thou hast mentioned—in movies or magazines. It is the lowest place in Purgatory, almost touching Hell."

"It must be a horrible place."

"And indeed it is. The women who suffer there are very, very wretched, although they usually do not remain in that place for long."

"Why? Because of the intensity of the suffering?"

"No, Michelle. That hath nothing to do with it."

"Then why?"

Effekadesh sighed and said:

"All the women who participate in such filthy acts deeply hate what they do. Most of them endure it only thanks to the drugs they take to bear a situation that is really nothing more than multiple rape. By the middle of their lives they have usually had to quit, and if they are fortunate enough to find God and repent, the terribly damaged state in which they spend the rest of their days because of the deep wounds all of that hath caused them is already sufficient purgation that considerably shortens their stay there."

"Ah, I see."

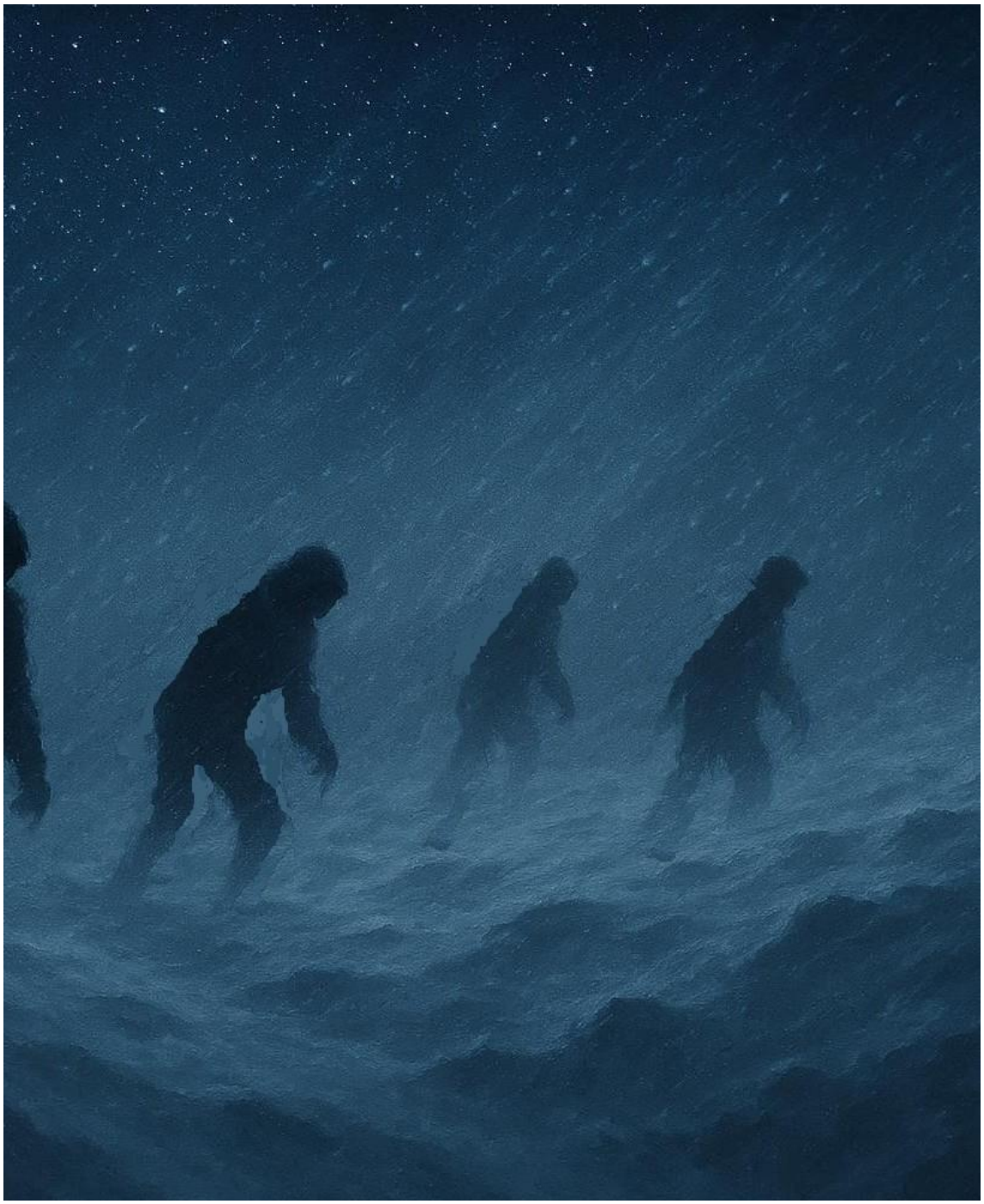
"The men have it worse—those who were their accomplices in such execrable acts and who are also there. They are like rapists, and they receive a very severe punishment."

"I understand," I said. "Are you going to take me to see that place?"

"No. Let us go to another one. No less harsh, by the way."

Gertrude

This time we appeared in a snowy landscape. It was nighttime, and the faint light from the starry sky revealed, through the blizzard, wandering figures moving about with moans of pain, trudging heavily forward.



"Where are we, Jeff?"

"This is the place where, among others, dwell the mothers who have murdered their own children."

I looked around. There really weren’t many people, which made sense. What woman would commit such a horror?

"I know what thou art thinking, Michelle, and thou art mistaken."

"Can you read my mind?"

"Only when God alloweth me to."

"Well, then, how am I mistaken?"

"In the West today, one out of every four children conceived is murdered by their mothers while still in their wombs. There is no more dangerous place on the entire planet than the womb of a Western woman."

"Abortion..."

"It is so. If thou seest this place so empty, it is because, unfortunately, very few souls who commit such an act have the immense fortune of confessing and asking God's forgiveness before they die."

"So the rest..."

"Thou canst imagine where they are, after committing such an execrable crime."

At that moment, I remembered that when I was very young, I thought I was pregnant and had looked for a clinic where I could get an abortion. Fortunately for me, it turned out to be a false alarm.

"This is a very harsh place, Michelle," Effekadesh said, looking around. "And the souls who dwell here usually do not stay long."

"Why? Isn't what they did that serious?"

"It is most grave. But many of these women have already purged a great part of their guilt during their earthly lives."

"How?"

"Thou canst not even imagine the remorse that usually accompanieth them after committing such a barbarity. They carry it with them their entire lives, and that repentance, together with confession, maketh their stay here not so long. Sins are also purged in life, Michelle."

At that moment, an elderly woman who was passing by saw Effekadesh and hurried toward us, sighing in pain. She was shivering and freezing cold.

"Would Your Grace have a crust of bread to spare?"

Before us stood a toothless old woman with deeply wrinkled skin and a hunched back. She was sniffling heavily because of the cold. Of course, she was naked, like almost all the souls who dwell in Purgatory.

"Here," Jeff offered, extending a small piece of bread in his hand. "But in exchange, thou must speak with my protégée."

"With whom?" The old woman looked around, unable to see anyone, naturally.

"Hello, good lady," I said to her. The woman turned toward the place where my voice was coming from.

"I am no 'good lady,' young one. I am the most wicked soul that ever trod the earth!"

"Why are you here?"

"For thievery!" she exclaimed, almost spitting the words. "For thievery I am here, and I shall remain in this place until the very Day of Judgment, so great are my offenses."

"For thievery?"

"Yes, Michelle," Effekadesh intervened. "Didst thou think that sins 'of the flesh' are the ones most severely punished?"

"But what did you steal?" I asked, looking at her.

"Everything! I stole everything!" she managed to say between shivers. A cold that, curiously, I didn't feel, despite being barefoot and in my pajamas — nor did my guardian angel.

The woman stood with her arms crossed over her chest, covering those wrinkled, sagging breasts that hung below her navel, trying in vain to warm herself. Her feet were blue — I think completely frozen — from standing barefoot in the snow. She only got brief relief during the few seconds when she lifted them alternately, making little hops. With the index finger and thumb of her right hand, she wiped the snot that had run down to her chin and flung it to the ground with contempt.

"I stole from everyone!" she continued, "and from many people."

"From whom?"

"From my daughters-in-law, from my neighbors, from the women in my village. From the whole world! From whom wouldst thou have me begin?"

"Well..."

"Begin with thy neighbors, Gertrude," Effekadesh suggested.

"My neighbors! Ha!" she exclaimed. "Those were the ones I stole the least from."

"What did you steal from them?"

"I stole their honor and their good name," she declared.

"I don't understand..."

"Behold, child. Thou seemest young, at least by thy voice. Dost thou know what gossip is? The whispering, the backbiting, and..."

"Yes, ma'am," I interrupted. "You're a gossip — and a nasty one." I couldn't help myself. Back at my parents' house, there was a woman just like her, and I know the type well.

"Thou hast said it!" she confirmed. "A gossip, a meddler, and one of the worst! I spent my life spreading rumors about my neighbors, only to spew poison from my mouth to the whole world. I lied, I exaggerated, I slandered, I murmured, I criticized... I did evil to many people, and for that I am here. Well, for that, and because the holy Curé of Ars — who is

now in glory — through my guardian angel, was able to come from the future by bilocation to hear my confession and make me repent of everything just before I died. Hast thou heard me well?"

"Yes, ma'am."

The woman shivered again from the cold, and I asked her:

"How long have you been here?"

"Four hundred and twenty-five years, three months, fourteen days, and... three hours, I believe," she managed to say between shivers and little hops.

"That long? Just for being a gossip?"

"Ha!" she exclaimed again, letting out a moan of cold. Her muscles tensed and her arms pressed together in a useless attempt to warm herself. "Would that it were only for that!"

"What else did you do?"

"I turned my sons against their wives without ceasing. Again, I lied, exaggerated, slandered, murmured, and criticized each and every one of my daughters-in-law... I even made a deal with the devil so that one of them would die after aborting my grandson!"

"Ah!" I exclaimed, completely horrified.

"Yes, fair maiden. My daughter-in-law aborted my grandson at my instigation, and then I made her commit suicide so she would go straight to Hell. What thinkest thou of that? That is how far my iniquity reached..."

"That sounds terrible... Absolutely terrible!"

"And terrible it is!" she cried. "That was me! My name itself was synonymous with evil, and everyone feared and hated me in equal measure. That was me!" she continued. Witch, meddler, gossip, busybody, snoop... thief and murderer! Hast thou heard me? Thief and murderer!"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I deserve Hell for all eternity, not the gentleness of this place."

"Come now, Gertrude," Effekadesh intervened. "The Lord granted thee the grace of repentance, and He awaiteth thee one day in Heaven."

Then the woman began to cry inconsolably, lamenting her horrible sins.

"But I did not only kill my grandson!" she managed to say between sobs. "I also killed fourteen boys and twelve girls who died in their mothers' wombs without seeing the light of the world. Those infants are now in Heaven, but their mothers burn in Hell for having come to me to abort their children. Those poor wretches are burning in Hell while my vile self is here, enjoying the mildness of this place!" she exclaimed, still crying. "They are in that horrible place that I deserved a thousand times, while I enjoy the comforts of Purgatory and speak with thee! Oh God! Forgive me! Forgive me, my Lord, for so much iniquity!"

Gertrude threw herself to the ground and began rolling in the snow. Her tears mixed with snot as the woman moaned without consolation, writhing in pain from the ice covering her naked body. She was truly pitiful. Effekadesh comforted her as best he could, lifting her from the ground and embracing her. He gave her another crust of bread, which she devoured eagerly, and that seemed to calm her a little. Then she looked toward where I was and added, after composing herself somewhat:

"I was a thief, for I stole the souls of all those poor women and delivered them to Satan," she lamented with a sigh. "Not to mention their children, whom I also stole from them and their families. I am a thief and a murderer! I am a thief and a murderer!" she repeated. "Say it to me, Your Graces! Spit in my face again and again!"

"A thief..."

"Yes, a thief! I robbed twenty-six infants of their lives! Their lives! The greatest of all possessions! How could I not be a thief? Spit green phlegm full of blood in my face — I shall swallow it with pleasure!" she cried. "Oh God! Forgive me! With my own hands, I killed all those infants!"

Gertrude threw herself to the ground again to keep rolling in the snow. She was filled with pain and compunction — not so much from the freezing cold, but from what she had done four hundred and twenty-five years, three months, fourteen days, three hours, and the few minutes she had been speaking with me earlier. This time Effekadesh did not comfort her or give her more bread; he let her purge her sins that way.

After a while longer, the old woman calmed down a bit and stood up again. Then my angel approached her, comforted her, caressed her cheek, stroked her coarse hair, and kissed her.

"And that is why I am here, fair maiden," she concluded. "I stole all of that, and therefore now I remain as those from whom I stole: with nothing, undergoing hunger and cold, waiting for the end of the world."

"The end of the world?"

"Yes, Michelle," Effekadesh told me. "When the end of time cometh, the Earth shall disappear and only Heaven and Hell shall remain. On that day, all the inhabitants of Purgatory who still remain here shall be freed."

"When will that be?"

"Only God knoweth. It may be tomorrow, next year, in a thousand years, or perhaps in ten thousand years. Who knoweth!"

"Will you be here until then, Gertrude?" I asked her.

"Until then, child. Until then. Even if the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel herself came next Saturday to free me and take me to Heaven, I would insist on remaining here, enduring hardships and lamenting my horrible sins, which fill me with such great guilt that, in comparison, the pangs of hunger and cold are but gentle caresses. Only when the Day of Final Judgment arriveth shall I be worthy of the consolations that our Lord Jesus Christ hath prepared for me for all Eternity."

At that moment, I began to cry as well. That woman was truly pitiful, but the love and faith she had for God and her deep sorrow for her sins were so great that, for that alone, she deserved to enter Heaven already.

Certainly, after so much time, God must have forgiven her abundantly and desired to have her with Him. But it was she who still did not consider herself worthy of His love, and He respected her will.

The Rose Garden

We left that terrible place, and in the blink of an eye we appeared in a completely different setting — nothing like what I had seen before.

It was a paradise garden. Yes, a field filled with flowers, with roses, whose exquisite perfume saturated the air and stretched as far as the eye could see. There was no longer darkness, but a radiant light that illuminated an immense and splendid garden bathed in sunlight.

"Where are we, Jeff? Is this the antechamber of Paradise?"

"No, Michelle. This is another place of purgation."

"Seriously? How is that possible?"

"It is a place filled with priests, among others."

"Priests? Of course," I thought. "These guys have connections, so they get sent to this nice, comfortable place."

"Thou art mistaken. This place is not comfortable at all — quite the opposite. These roses, as thou surely knowest, are full of thorns. It is a flower that grows from a stem covered in sharp spines."

"Yes, I know those plants well. My grandmother had them at her house and I used to help her prune them in the fall. It was hard not to get pricked, even if you were careful."

"Thou art right. The field thou seest is so dense that it has no internal paths to walk on. One cannot advance without being pricked over and over again, constantly. The penitents must reach those mountains in the distance, where there are more rose bushes, and then another identical valley, and so on."

"So they have to move forward like the adulterers did. They don’t wander aimlessly."

"It is so. And while those others were covered in sores, these are covered in scratches and wounds that worsen every time new thorns pierce the same spots."

"Ugh!" I muttered. "So the mortification is constant."

"Yes. It is the equivalent of the salty rain thou sawest earlier, which never ceaseth."

I looked at the landscape, which no longer seemed so idyllic. Indeed, here and there I could see the heads of some men and women advancing slowly, stumbling, and with every step they let out a cry of pain.

"They only find relief when they stop, but their longing to move forward and meet God preventeth them from stopping. The advance is slow, as thou canst understand, for the ground is also full of dry branches covered in thorns, and, well, thou knowest they are completely naked and therefore barefoot."

"But there aren’t only priests here, right? I also see women."

"Yes, of course. Here are also all those who fed only their bodies while their souls starved. They are the onanists, the lazy, all those who preferred immediate, ephemeral, and empty pleasure instead of lasting and eternal pleasure. It is also full of certain politicians and leaders. These are people who promised a paradise on Earth and brought only suffering. Because of them, many people have been condemned, and they are indirectly responsible for many of the sins committed by their subjects."

"Yeah, I get it. But I don’t understand... Why roses?"

"This is a place of deprivation. The priests, for example, by neglecting their duty to save souls, deprived others of glory — that is, people who were condemned because of them — and here they purge that sin through the deprivation of all kinds of comforts. They suffer great discomfort that is not relieved by anything, for they are constantly being pricked."

I observed the penitents — men and women, all bloodied, with thorns stuck in their arms, legs, and even their faces. Some groaned silently, others clenched their teeth in desperation. A shiver ran down my spine.

"So the roses..." I murmured, trying to understand.

"The roses and their aroma symbolize that deceptive pleasure," Jeff explained, "which in reality hideth a deception, and which is not fully appreciated until one tryeth to grasp it."

"The thorns," I said, with a lump in my throat.

"It is so," he confirmed, with a slight nod.

"So the priests here are the ones who abused..."

"No," he interrupted me firmly, looking me in the eyes. "Those sins are very grave, and they lead directly to Hell. Those who manage to be saved and reach here suffer unspeakably. However, their victims, if they entrusted themselves to God, enjoy great glory in Heaven."

I felt a shudder. Jeff's tone became more serious:

"The problem is that in addition to the great crime of abuse, in many cases they also caused those people to turn away from the faith and be condemned, hating religion and everything it representeth. Therefore, they receive a double punishment: on one hand, their direct offense, and on the other, the indirect offense as 'causers'."

"I see," I whispered, looking at the roses that now seemed redder than ever. "No wonder this place is full of them."

"It is full of them," he confirmed, "although the vast majority are not here for abusing anyone. Despite what the press says, only very few priests were involved in that scandal. Those who commit such atrocities are, fortunately, scarce."

"Then why?" I asked, my heart racing.

"This place is full of bishops and prelates who have failed in their main duty, which is to save souls and lead them to Heaven."

"How?" My voice sounded incredulous.

"Mainly because they stopped warning without rest about this place and, above all, about Hell. Which is precisely what Jesus did in His preachings."

"But... isn't that what they do?"

"No, Michelle. Rather, it is what they used to do. For many decades now they no longer speak of it, because they are afraid of 'scaring' the faithful."

"Ah!" I exclaimed, surprised. "I didn't know that."

"In the case of the priests, by not wanting to scare the faithful and by tickling their ears instead, they have brought them to this place — or what is worse, to eternal damnation."

Effekadesh paused, and his gaze hardened.

"This is like medicine. If today's society does not respond to conventional treatments — that is, if they do not want to believe and act well out of love for God and in gratitude for all He provideth thee, and for the Paradise He hath promised — if they do not want to believe that moral laws are for the good of the human species even in earthy life, then there is no choice but to use more aggressive treatments. If pills fail, one must resort to surgery. And a doctor — a doctor of souls, as a priest is — cannot spare the patient those treatments with the excuse that they are painful, for all he will achieve is that the patient dieth. Dost thou understand?"

"Yes," I replied in a faint voice. "I understand the logic."

At that moment, a man passed beside us and groaned. Effekadesh and I were floating above the roses, and the man stopped as soon as he saw the angel. In that area the flowers were

taller than normal human height, so he hadn't noticed us until he reached exactly where we were.

The man was truly pitiful. He was completely covered in blood, with multiple thorns stuck all over his body. Since he didn't react, Effekadesh greeted him first:

"Hello, Alfred."

"Do you know me?"

"Yes. We spoke once, ten years ago."

"I don't remember anymore," he sighed, wiping his forehead, which was covered in sweat. "Here you lose all sense of time."

"Hey, Jeff," I whispered. "How do you know so many people in this place? Aren't guardian angels supposed to always be with their protégés?"

"That is true. I am always with thee."

"Then how...?"

"Well... when thou sleepest, there are times I take a walk around here to comfort some of the penitents. And also to Heaven, to spend time with some friends."

"Ah, okay," I replied. Then I realized something. "But if you're always with me... have you seen everything I've done... at all times?"

"Everything, Michelle. Absolutely everything."

I felt the blood rush to my face. *How embarrassing...* I thought, remembering some very intimate moments that involved certain toys.

"The problem is not that I have seen all that," he said, reading my mind again. "The issue is that God hath also seen it. That is what thou shouldst be ashamed of," he gently reproached me, and I turned red as a tomato.

Meanwhile, the man had been trying to push aside some dry branches on the ground so he could stand there without getting pricked, while wiping the sweat from his forehead. Then he looked at Effekadesh and asked:

"Ten years, you say? Then... how long have I been here?"

"Dost thou truly wish to know?"

"Actually, no," Alfred answered, lowering his gaze.

"Good day, sir," I said, trying to sound friendly.

"Who are you?" he asked, looking in my direction.

"I'm Michelle."

"She is my protégée," Effekadesh clarified.

"Ah, I see. Well, I'd shake your hand, but I don't want you to get pricked."

"Don't worry. From what I've been told, we can't touch each other."

"Yeah, that's right."

I watched him as he tried to clear the branches and couldn't help asking:

"Why don't you pull out the thorns that are stuck in you? How do they even come off the roses?"

"Look," he answered in a tired voice, "the thorns don't normally come off the plant. But when the branch is dry, it becomes brittle, and if you try to move fast, they get stuck in you."

"And they don't bother you?"

"Of course they bother me!"

"Then why don't you remove them?"

The man looked toward where my voice was coming from and thought for a moment before answering:

"That's what I used to do. I'd pull them out as soon as they got stuck. But what for? Soon enough another one would get stuck in the same spot. Now I leave them in, because it's better if the new ones try to pierce where there's already a thorn instead of fresh flesh."

I made a pained face.

"I only remove the ones from my genitals, because I can't stand it there. Having something stuck and then rubbing against a stem in that area causes unbearable pain."

I grimaced again. The man was indeed completely covered in blood, with fresh blood dripping from the deeper wounds — except in that area, where there were mostly dry scabs.

"But why are you here?"

He let out a deep sigh and then said:

"Our Lord Jesus Christ clearly proclaimed: 'What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it?' Well, the Church today has already lost 99 sheep, and it doesn't go after them, lest it lose the only one it has left."

"So you are..."

"Was. I'm already dead. And yes, I was a bishop. A bad bishop, because I didn't take proper care of the flock entrusted to me. I even removed a priest from his position because his parishioners complained that 'he was too harsh'!"

"And what should you have done?"

"In such a catastrophic situation, with almost the entire flock lost, we should have gone out into the streets and shouted with all our strength, proclaiming Jesus Christ and warning about the terrible fate that awaits those who persist in sin and softness."

"They would have thought you were crazy."

"Without a doubt. But that is what used to be done and how it was preached until the second half of the 20th century, and there were great numbers of practicing Christians. The churches were full! Yes, if we did it now they would think we were crazy and laugh at us. Just as they also mocked Christ, by the way."

"Many would have continued their life of sin despite the warnings, of course. But surely some — even if out of fear — would have converted. And at least Christ could not reproach us bishops, and now I would not find myself like this."

"Anyway," he continued, "I have to keep going. I have the hope... although I don't know if this time it will come true, just as it hasn't the other times..." He began to cry.

"Of what?" I asked.

"I have the hope that those mountains in the distance will be the last ones I have to cross. Oh God!" he exclaimed. "If that were truly the case, I would run there right now without caring in the slightest if thorns pierce my arms, my thighs, or my face. I would step on all the dry branches with joy, even if they lacerated the soles of my feet... and to me it would feel like stepping on soft feathers!"

"Of course, Alfred, you'll see — this time it will be," I encouraged him. "Don't lose hope."

"No, hope is the last thing you lose. Thank you very much for the comfort," he said goodbye.

The bishop moved on, trying as best he could to push aside the stems in front of him, without much success. Even when he pushed them where there were no thorns, it was impossible not to brush against one at face or leg level.

Since he had been stopped for a few minutes talking to us, the path he had cleared through the plants hadn't closed up yet, and another penitent had taken advantage of that gap to walk through a clearer area.

The man emerged from the brambles like a shadow forcing his way through with desperate blows. His skin was covered in fresh wounds, and blood mixed with dust and the sickly-sweet perfume of the roses, creating a contrast that turned my stomach. He advanced with difficulty, pushing aside the dry stems with abrupt movements while the thorns mercilessly pierced his arms and legs. Every gesture was a losing battle against the pain. He quickly saw Effekadesh, whom he practically ignored. But I couldn't resist speaking to him.

"Hello, sir," I greeted him, trying to sound kind. "Are you a priest too?"

The man let out a bitter laugh without really stopping. His gaze, lost among the stems, looked more like someone searching for an impossible exit.

"Me, a priest? Yeah, that's what I should have been. Maybe I wouldn't be in these circumstances now," he replied, his tone full of self-reproach.

"Oh, don't be so sure," I replied. "We just spoke with one who's been here for at least ten years."

The man stopped for a moment, as if my words had hit him.

"Ten years in this hell?" he exclaimed.

"Purgatory," Effekadesh corrected calmly, but the other man ignored him.

"How can a person endure 3,652 days here, receiving an average of 30 pricks per minute? That adds up to..." The man did the mental calculation, moving his lips rapidly while continuing to move forward, trying desperately not to let the path the bishop had opened close up. Even so, he still got pricked as he stepped on the dry branches on the ground. "157,766,400 pricks!" he exclaimed, eyes wide. "Almost 158 million pricks! How can anyone bear that?"

"Believe me, this place is not one of the worst," the angel warned with a serenity that contrasted sharply with the penitent's desperation.

"What are you saying?!" the man replied with a shout that echoed among the brambles. "If I've been here almost half a million and I'm already more than fed up!"

"And that's in...?" I asked, intrigued.

"Eleven days, twelve hours, forty-three minutes and..."

At that moment I burst out laughing and the man fell silent, looking toward where I was with a face of indignation that would have led him to hit me if he could. But I couldn't help it, even though the man was more than pitiful, as bloodied as he was. It was then that he realized the angel wasn't alone, since my laughter continued and Effekadesh kept his usual impassive expression.

"What are you laughing at, huh?"

"Forgive me. I really am sorry. But I've already met several people here, and honestly, being here less than two weeks..."

"What?" he asked, eyes wide open.

"Well, you're a newcomer and I don't want to discourage you, but I think you still have a long way to go..."

"Listen," Effekadesh interrupted in a grave tone. "Time is relative, and it is proportional to the punishment. The more intense it is, the less time one spends here."

"Then could you tell me how many days I have left? You don't have to give me an exact number. Just tell me how many digits the figure has and I'll be satisfied."

"Charles, I cannot tell thee that."

"How do you know my name? Why can't you tell me?" He asked all this without stopping, taking advantage of the momentum left by his predecessor.

"I know because, in the current circumstances and being with my protégée, God alloweth me certain insights."

"Ah! Perfect. The number, please."

"Unfortunately, I cannot provide it."

"Why? Because God forbids it?"

"No. Simply because I do not know. Only God knoweth."

The man made a face of frustration and seemed to slow his pace a little. His shoulders slumped, as if the weight of uncertainty was more unbearable than the thorns.

"How can you keep such precise count?" I asked, trying to ease the tension.

"Well, it's because I'm... or rather, I was an accountant."

"Ah, okay. You're a numbers guy."

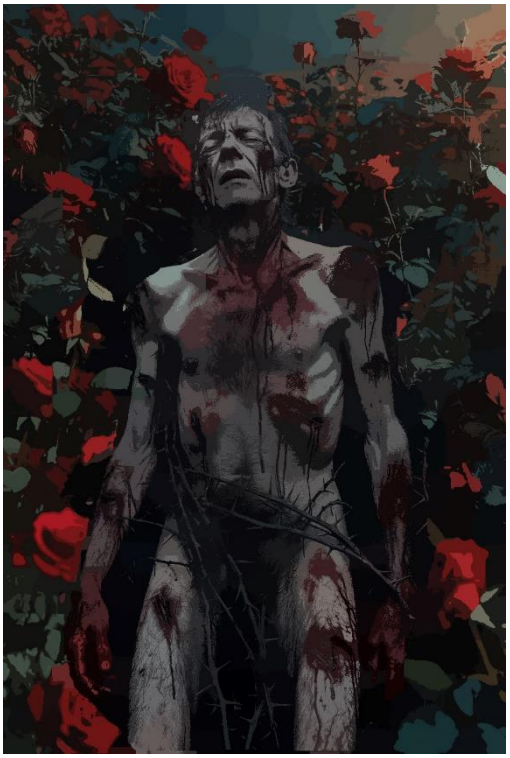
"Yes," he replied with a sigh. "And don't think it doesn't cost me. The nights here are very dim and it's hard to keep track. But as you can see, I have a calculator in my head, much to my regret."

"Much to your regret?"

"If I hadn't been so calculating, maybe I wouldn't be in these circumstances."

"What did you do? If it's not too personal."

"Rather, what I *didn't* do..." he answered in a broken voice, just before exclaiming in desperation, "Shit! Where did that guy go?"



Sure enough, Charles had gotten lost. The bishop had tried to go through what seemed to be the path the other had taken, but it was thicker than it looked and he had abandoned it for another with fewer brambles. But our man didn't know that and fell into the same trap. Now he was surrounded and didn't know which way to go. At that moment he began to cry, and Effekadesh and I descended to his level. The angel comforted him:

"Come now, Charles. Do not worry. Thou must learn to have more patience."

"Yes, of course," he muttered, wiping his tears with the back of his hand after removing the thorns stuck there. "From what I can see, I have to learn to mortify myself."

"It is so," the angel confirmed. "That is the path of purgation."

"A mortification I did not have in life, that's for sure."

"Why didn't you have it?" I asked gently.

"Because I preferred short-term thinking and immediate pleasure instead of openly proclaiming Christ."

The man was finishing crying and we let him continue:

"I was a Sunday Mass Christian. A devout man who gave alms to the poor. But in reality, that didn't cost me much. There were other things that cost me much more and that I didn't do."

"What things?"

"As I said, openly proclaiming Christ. At the office I didn't give testimony of my faith, and I showed no sign that I was Christian."

"Why didn't you?"

"Because I was afraid they would laugh at me, or that I would look 'weird.' I don't know... I feared losing prestige, or something worse, I suppose. And that was the problem, because Christians are obliged to proclaim their faith and make the Gospel known."

"Well, you're not a priest. You didn't have to."

"Don't think that. Yes, I wasn't going to start giving sermons on the subway — although it wouldn't have hurt — but there are certain things that are unforgivable."

"For example?"

"Simply not answering: 'Sunday I can't go with you because I have to go to Mass,' instead of just saying 'Sunday I can't.' Or also, when going out to eat with coworkers: 'No, I'm not ordering steak, no matter how good it is, because today is Friday of Lent and we can't eat meat.'"

"You can't eat meat on Fridays?" I asked Effekadesh.

"Only on Fridays of Lent, Michelle. This was taught to thee in due time."

I thought for a moment and then replied:

"Yes, I think it rings a bell. But that was in the old days, right?"

"No. In the old days it was 'worse.' The Friday rule is one of the few things that remain, but even so, almost everyone ignores it."

"Ignores it?"

"I mean, they skip it."

"Everyone skips it," the man added, "but I was supposed to observe it, especially in the face of others. It's like blessing the table. A practice I always did when I was alone, but stopped doing when I was with others. I was ashamed..."

I imagined a hypothetical coworker doing that when we went out to eat from the office. It certainly would have seemed more than shocking. We all would have mocked and made fun of him, no doubt.

"I could have at least whispered a thanksgiving..." he continued, "even if it was just making the sign of the cross. All those are small gestures, simple ways to give testimony of the faith... and I didn't do it! I didn't do it! And now I find myself like this..."

"Yeah," I murmured, feeling a lump in my throat.

"I should have done all that and also put a crucifix, even a small one, on my desk at the office. Many people would have asked me about it, and that way I would have given testimony too."

The man seemed truly contrite, and I tried to encourage him:

"Well, don't worry. Without having my angel's experience—" I glanced at Effekadesh—"I'd dare say those 'little sins' won't mean much time here for you."

"Do not think so, Michelle," Jeff clarified. "Everything dependeth on the circumstances, as thou already knowest. But God giveth great importance to those details. Both Saint Mark and Saint Luke relate what Jesus said: 'For whosoever shall be ashamed of me and of my words, of him shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he shall come in his own glory.'"

"He said that?"

"He did," Charles replied, with tears in his eyes. "And I was ashamed of Him, indeed. I was ashamed to proclaim Him publicly! Do you understand, girl?" He started crying again while kicking some stems. This time he didn't care much about getting pricked.

"Come on, man," Effekadesh comforted him. "Jesus is not ashamed of thee. The fact that thou art here and not in Hell is clear proof of that."

"I know." He wiped his tears again with the back of his hand. "But He said: 'If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.' I think that quote is from Saint Matthew."

"It is so," Effekadesh replied.

"I preferred the rose to the cross, and now this is what I have. Roses! Millions of roses!" he declared. "Anyway," he sighed, "I suppose I'll have to get used to this martyrdom. The martyrdom I didn't have in the world, and that I now have here."

The man began to move toward the mountains, trying to find an area that wasn't too dense, without success. I watched him walk away, his silhouette disappearing into the sea of thorns like a shadow dissolving in blood and the deceptive perfume of the roses.

The Poet

Dawn was breaking. Effekadesh took me back to the immense hall with the checkered floor where I had first met Arthur and Dorothy. Now, with the first rays of sunlight, she had stopped playing and kept her two hands clasped together, her forearms resting on the closed lid of the piano. Her head was bowed and her eyes were closed, as if waiting for something — and that something happened. Her husband began to recite a deeply moving poem full of anguish and remorse.

In this hall of marble and silence, where time dissolves in slow, lingering notes, I behold thee, my love, without truly seeing thee, like one who gazes upon a dream that never wakes.

Thy figure, dressed in eternal white, sways to the rhythm of a weeping piano, and every tear that falls upon the keys is a sigh that my soul devours.

There is no night I do not listen to thee, nor day I do not recite to thee, yet never do our eyes meet, nor are they ever permitted to.

We are together, yes, in this sentence, united by vows that I once spoke, by a love that was but a promise, but never a root that took hold and grew.

We denied ourselves the gift of creation, out of fear, out of ego, out of cold calculation, and now Heaven has given us an endless time without dew.

Thy music is my punishment and my consolation; each chord a petal of sorrow, and I, from this chair with no destination, love thee more with every scene.

My grief is a note that time cannot dispel, in this vast hall of shining tiles. Seated in this armchair my soul sighs, while the fingers of my beloved lean upon the piano.

Bitter and cruel is the fate we must endure, for not having been faithful to each other, now we must weigh it all.

For not having given ourselves that honey, we watch the centuries pass, and now we taste the bitter gall, unable to find contentment.

We gave our bodies, but we did not give our souls. We did not give ourselves in fullness, and now we have no peace.

She stands with her back to me, her dark hair stirring, with melodies that slowly reach me. I watch her, I listen, and my soul trembles, and my eyes flood with tears.

I could have seen her face to face, I could have loved her gaze, but I made myself sterile, I refused to give myself. And now I can only contemplate, from afar, that banished soul — the woman I prevented from loving me.

I wish I could feel her, I wish I could touch her, but my hands pass through her like air. What would I not give to embrace her! While I watch time slip away.

Her white wedding dress, like a specter, reminds me of what was, and what never came to be, and in the distance my sorrow, of sad appearance, of a love that never was, that never existed.

I listen to my poems, verses of pain, and I lament the love I never knew; for the life I never created, for the passion without color, for the sentence I am in, and the end I never saw.

At night I shall hear her play again, and I shall listen once more with a broken soul. My grief shall be a verse, a sigh, a lament, in this prison of souls, of sorrow and anguish.

I remember the day we said "yes," with lips that knew nothing of the soul. And now, centuries later, I listen as thou playest this sad melody.

Who art thou, woman of lace and shadow? Who was I, man of wrathful countenance? We married and never knew each other, we joined and remained barren.

This hall of grief, misfortune, and sorrow, condemned to exist in punishment, filled with pain and unease, because thou art not here with me.

Here we remain, waiting, like statues that are never touched, waiting century after century, without a love that ever overflows.

Lamenting those days in which we lived absent. Just punishment for impious souls! Harsh grief for suffering beings.

Will the dawn one day return our gaze to us? Will God, in His mercy, grant us a single day?

Meanwhile I shall remain seated, listening to thy piano weep, and thou, when the sun rises, shalt listen to my soul sing.

"How sad this is, Jeff!"

"Indeed it is."

"Does he always recite the same poem?"

"The same one every day, and then he continues with others. Thus they spend their lives, waiting for someone to remember them and pray for their souls."

"Is it possible that someone remembers them?"

"It is always possible, if they are remembered. We angels spend our time stirring memories in the living, and sometimes we succeed. If someone were to offer a Mass for their souls, their time of atonement would be considerably reduced. Even a simple prayer would bear much fruit. But it is so difficult... nowadays no one prays for anyone, not even their closest family members."

I nodded. In my closest circle, I didn't know anyone who prayed, let alone went to Mass. Not even my mother, who, although raised in the Faith by my grandmother, had drifted completely away.

"Perhaps the children these two never had," Effekadesh continued, "if they had been properly raised, would have offered a funeral Mass to God for the repose of their souls, and now they would no longer be here."

"The children..."

"They are a gift from God, Michelle. But the Devil, always lying in wait, has made women believe they are a burden and an obstacle, when in reality there is nothing that brings greater satisfaction, especially in the long term. How many older women sigh with regret for not having had them! Women who do not even have a single daughter to call them, to ask what they did during the day, to comfort them in their old age."

The Gateway

Suddenly, we were back in the enormous room from the beginning. The only difference was that this time we weren't alone. Here and there were a few people accompanied by beings who, by their appearance, must also have been guardian angels.

"Well, today it's a bit less empty," Effekadesh commented. "Not too many years ago, this place was teeming with people of all ages and conditions."

Indeed, there were no more than four or five people, not counting the angels. Almost all of them were crying or at least very sad, while their protectors did everything they could to comfort them and give them courage for the struggle that awaited them.

Up to that moment, I had just gone along with everything, without questioning it. Maybe unconsciously I thought everything I was seeing was a dream — or rather, a nightmare — caused by the drug I had taken. But at that moment, I did question it, and seriously. If it had all been a dream, why wasn't I waking up? Because normally, the moment you realize you're dreaming and having a nightmare is when you wake up...

But I was still there, holding Effekadesh's hand. A hand that I was now squeezing tightly, as if to make sure it was all real. I squeezed it several times, and that's when I became aware of a terrible truth: I had died, and now a horrible sentence in Purgatory awaited me — probably with the fornicators.

"Why have you shown me all this, Jeff? Why didn't you just take me straight to my destination? Huh? What is it? The salty rain?"

"Thy destination, Michelle?"

"Yes, my destination. Is it with the fornicators? With the immodest women? Huh? Where?"

"Thy destination right now is Hell, for thou hast not confessed your sins, nor repented, nor asked God's forgiveness for all thy sins."

"Hell?" My mouth suddenly went dry. My vision blurred and such anguish came over me that I thought I would faint right then and there. But I didn't, thanks to Effekadesh holding me up, and especially thanks to what he said next:

"But thou canst not go to Hell because thou hast not yet died. Yes, tonight thou wert going to die, because the drug thou tookest is incompatible with thy body: thou shouldst have suffered cardiac arrest. In fact, thou hast been in a coma for much of the night. But there is someone in thy family who has been praying to God for thee for many years, and the Lord always listeneth to the supplications of His servants."

"My grandmother..."

"Indeed. She is already with us in Paradise and hath obtained that we show thee a foretaste of what awaiteth thee."

"So then," my expression changed, "I am destined to suffer the pains of Purgatory when I die?"

"It is likely... provided thou change thy life. Very few enter Heaven directly. There is always some trace of sin left in each of you. Nothing unclean can enter the Kingdom of God."

I grew sad, though not as much as I had been just moments before.

"Fear not, Michelle. Purgatory is a place of purification, not of suffering."

"How can you say that after everything you've shown me?"

"It is a place of purification," he insisted, "and only thou shalt determine its intensity and duration. For example, the devotees of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, all those who wear her scapular with devotion, have guaranteed deliverance from this place on the Saturday following their death. On that day, the Mother of God cometh to rescue her children, the Carmelites, who await her with joy and not with suffering, full of hope and fervor."

"But that is not the only means," he continued. "The living, through their prayers and sufferings on Earth, can also offer suffrages that mitigate and reduce the pains of those in Purgatory. Not to mention those who share in the redemptive Cross of Christ by offering their earthly sorrows to God. They will have already passed their purgatory in life, and, depending on the cases, their stay here will be minimal or even nonexistent."

"So the sufferings on Earth make the pains of Purgatory less?"

"It is so."

"But then, why didn't it help Beatrice at all? She ended up alone, suffered from cancer, had her breasts amputated, and finally died..."

"It did not help her because she did not offer it to God. She suffered it in a sterile way, without any fruit. Had she had faith, had she confessed her sins with true spirit of repentance, she could have taken all those crosses to Jesus and laid them at the foot of His, and thereby purged her faults in life and even those of others. But she did not. Only the extreme unction she received in her final hours was able to open the doors of Heaven for her, though she still had to pass through a long process of purgation, as thou hast seen."

"Yes, I've seen that. And all thanks to her guardian angel. What was her name?"

"Marilíadesh."

"That's right. Just like Gertrude's, who also saved her at the last moment. Right?"

"Yes, that one also succeeded, and in her case it was quite a feat. Thou seest," he continued, "we guardian angels have very little room to act. If our protégés want to sin, there is little we can do to prevent it, although we always try. God respecteth people's free will to do good or to do evil."

"Then what good is your protection during life?"

"We prevent many dangers, even if it may not seem so. But what occupies most of our time is the battle against other angels who wish to devour you."

"What do you mean?"

"The demons, Michelle. They too are angels like us, only they chose the 'dark' side."

"Have you had to defend me from any?"

"Many times. But it is a fierce battle in which we do not always win."

"Why?"

"Mainly because the person maketh it very easy for them and very difficult for us."

I stared at him, waiting for him to continue, and he did:

"The key is sin, Michelle. The more unconfessed sins a person carries, the more doors they open to them, and the more they close to us. However, if a person is in a state of grace — that is, has no grave sins pending confession and receives Communion frequently — that raiseth a practically insurmountable barrier through which demons cannot pass."

"And if they do pass? What do they do?"

"Against a person in a state of grace they can do little. But they devour hardened sinners, as I told thee. In addition to suffering horrible temptations to which they gladly yield, cases of diabolical oppression of all kinds are not infrequent — and even possessions, especially today."

"Are there really possessions?"

"More than ever, Michelle. People have turned away from God as never before, and that leaveth the field wide open for demons to act as they please. Possessions are horrible afflictions that are often mistaken for psychiatric disorders and usually end in the person's suicide. It is terrible... And all because they want nothing to do with God."

"But why doesn't He do something?"

"What wouldst thou have Him do? If a person, in the exercise of their freedom, rejecteth God in their life, He cannot do anything. It is another matter if they implore His help, of course. That would give us, the guardian angels, more strength, and it would be easier for us to repel the demons. But of course, nowadays no one does that."

"Is it enough to implore God's help to expel demons?"

"No, it is not enough. That is where one begins, of course. But the key is confession and the Eucharist — that is, receiving Communion and the Sacred Host, for example, at Mass, after having previously confessed all sins to a priest. That is the best exorcism, and there is no demon that remaineth in a body after that."

I remained thoughtful for a few moments. The whole subject of demons and possessions horrified me, so I decided to steer the conversation back to the previous point.

"Okay, okay, I understand. So your actions are mostly in the 'supernatural' realm. Right? But how do you act in the world?"

"As I told thee, we can do little to interfere with human freedom. Only at the moment of death does the Lord grant us greater freedom to exercise our powers and try to make people repent and accept the presence of a priest; and even then, most of the time it is not enough."

"So that’s why you came to me now, Jeff? Because I was about to die?"

Effekadesh looked at me intently and took a moment before answering. Finally he said:

"I have always been with thee, Michelle. From the very first instant thy parents conceived thee."

At that moment, a woman nearby let out a scream. It was an elderly woman without legs whose angel had probably just explained where she was. I didn’t quite catch what he said, but they were undoubtedly words of comfort. Then I looked around. Some of the people who had been there earlier were gone, and others who had just arrived had taken their place.

"I don’t understand one thing, Jeff. You told me that this room, like the places we’ve been, is so large because it was built to hold a great number of people."

"It is so. This Gateway, for example, used to be packed. And now... look. There are only three or four of us. In the past there were many more people. The landscape of the adulterers used to be so full... especially of men who had gone with prostitutes."

"Then why isn’t there as much people now? Where are all the people who die? Do they go straight to Heaven or what?"

"No, Michelle... Would that it were so!" He began to cry. "Would that it were so!"

"Then...?"

Effekadesh didn’t answer. He continued crying, with increasing sorrow and feeling. It was then that I understood where all those souls were — all those unfortunate ones who hadn’t even been able to reach Purgatory.

The Awakening

It was Saturday morning. The sunlight streamed clearly through my bedroom window. It was the first time I'd seen anything so dazzling after so much darkness.

I got up to go to the bathroom. What time was it? It was at the end of the hall, and to get there I had to pass by my roommates Emily and Jessica's doors. It was at that moment that Jessica came out of her room.

"Wow... you really missed out on something yesterday."

"What?"

"Antonio. He left us both more than satisfied. I think he would have even had some for you too. But you went to sleep..."

"Oh, right."

"Anyway, he's coming around next weekend. That way you can see for yourself. Or rather, with your own ovaries."

"I won't be here next week."

"Why? Are you going to see your parents?"

"No. Well... yes." Look, I hadn't thought of that. There's a Carmelite convent next to them too.

“Carmelites?”

“Yes. Did you know that Our Lady of the Mount Carmel rescues her children the Saturday after thy die? Just a few days of Purgatory (if any) and then you’re out!”

“Michelle, what are you talking about?”

“Jessica, I’m going to become a nun.”

"What did you just say?"

"I have to pray and have Masses offered for Edward and Beatrice. So he can deliver his seed soon to its wife, and so Beatrice can find her legs. And also for Arthur and Dorothy, so they can finally see each other, embrace, and enter Heaven. And for Gertrude, so she can forgive herself and find angels who will occasionally give her crusts of bread. I have so many people to pray for! Not forgetting the bishop, of course... what was his name again? Anyway, I’ll pray for him too, so those mountains in the distance are the last ones he has to cross. And for Charles, the accountant, so God gives him patience. And of course, for myself, because I don’t want to spend centuries soaking my sores in salty water."

"Have you lost your mind, Michelle? Or did whatever Antonio gave us yesterday make you hallucinate?"

"I’ve also thought about marrying Tom. That guy seems to have good intentions. But of course, that’s riskier. What if he doesn’t want to have children? Then it would be even worse. Because I don’t want to spend centuries playing the piano locked in a room, starving to death.

“Yes,” I confirmed. “I think the convent is the best and safest option.”

The End

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